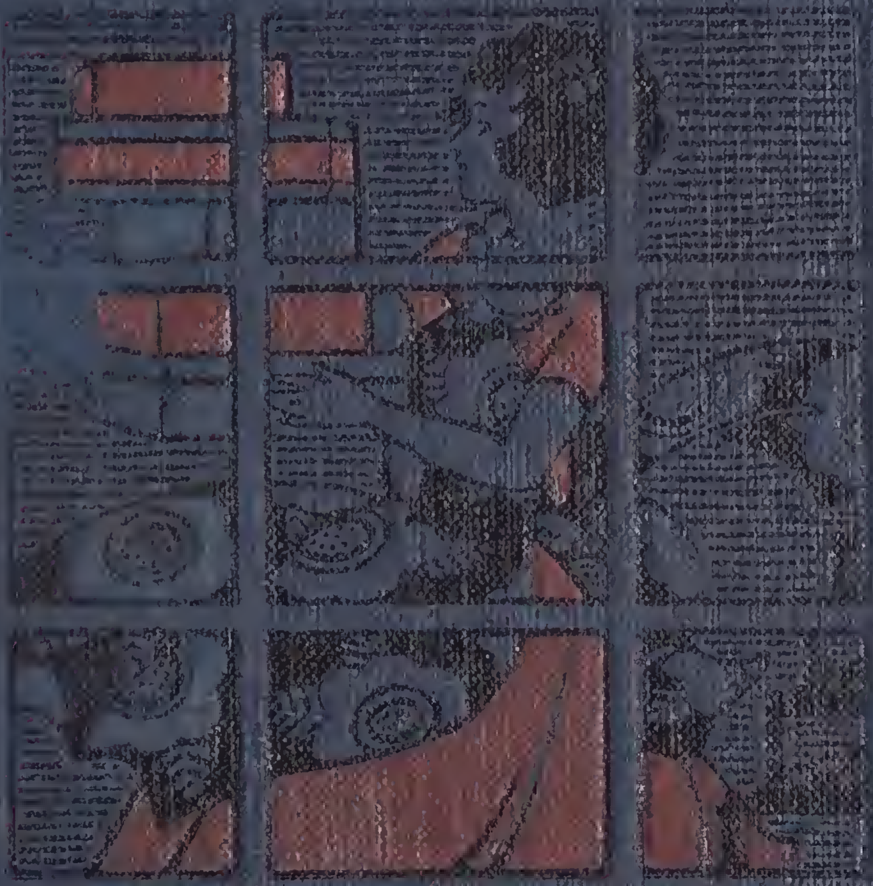
# NANCY BRANDON ENTHUSIAST



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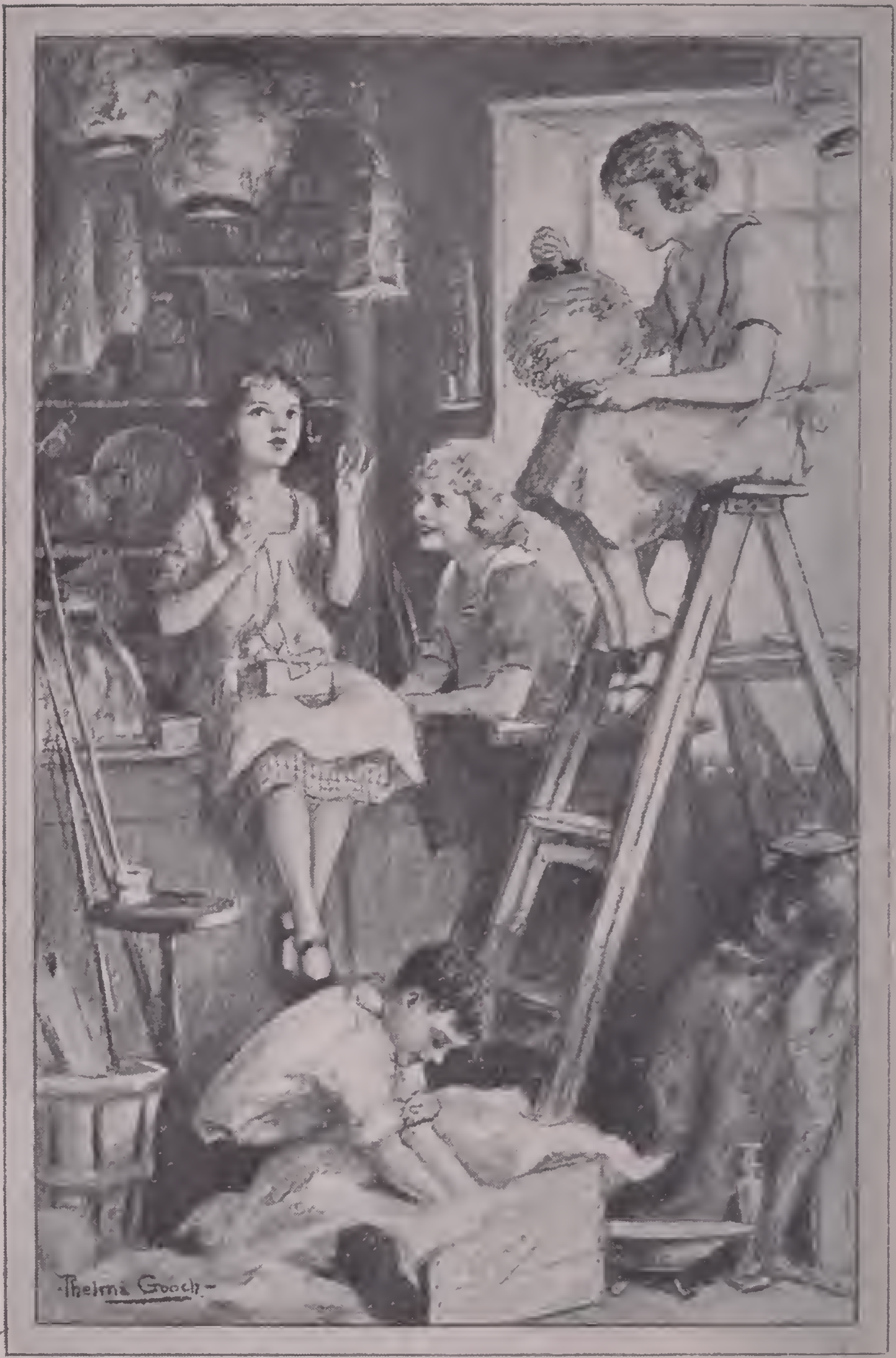
Thelma Gooch

They had a merry time getting the Whatnot Shop ready.

*—Page 85*

# NANCY BRANDON: ENTHUSIAST

BY

LILIAN GARIS

ILLUSTRATED BY
THELMA GOOCH

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# NANCY BRANDON: ENTHUSIAST

## CHAPTER I

### THE GIRL AND THE BOY

THE small kitchen was untidy. There were boxes empty and some crammed with loose papers, while a big clothes basket was filled—with a small boy, who took turns rolling it like a boat and bumping it up and down like a flivver. Ted Brandon was about eleven years old, full of boyhood's importance and bristling with boyhood's pranks.

His sister Nancy, who stood placidly reviewing the confusion, was, she claimed, in her teens. She was also just now in her glory, for after many vicissitudes and uncertainties they were actually moved into the old Townsend place at Long Leigh.

"You're perfectly silly, Ted. You know it's simply a wonderful idea," she proclaimed loftily.

"Do I." There was no question in the boy's tone.

"Well, you ought to. But, of course, boys—"

"Oh, there you go. Boys!!" No mistaking this tone.

"Ted Brandon, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. To be so—so mean to mother."

"Mean to mother! Who said anything about mother?"

"This is mother's pet scheme."

"Pretty queer scheme to keep us cooped up all vacation." He rocked the basket vigorously.

"We won't have to stay in much at all. Why, just odd times, and besides—" Nancy paused to pat her hair. She might have patted it without pausing but her small brother Ted would then have been less impressed by her assumed dignity, "you see, Teddy, I'm working for a principle. I don't believe that girls should do a bit more housework than boys."

"Oh, I know you believe that all-righty." Ted allowed himself to sigh but did not pause to do so. He kept right on rocking and snapping the blade of his pen-knife open and shut, as if the snap meant something either useful or amusing.

"Well, I guess I know what I'm talking about," declared Nancy, "and now, even mother has come around to agree with me. She's going right on with her office work and you and I are to run this lovely little shop."

"You mean *you* are to run the shop and *I'll* wash the dishes." Deepest scorn and seething irony hissed through Teddy's words. He even flipped the pen-knife into the sink board and nicked, but did not break, the apple-sauce dish.

"Of course you must do your part." Nancy lifted up two dishes and set them down again.

"And yours, if you have your say. Oh,

what's the use of talkin' to girls?" Ted tumbled out of the basket, pushed it over until it banged into a soap box, then straightening up his firm young shoulders, he prepared to leave the scene.

"There's no use talking to girls, Ted," replied his sister, "if you don't talk sense."

"Sense!" He jammed his cap upon his head although he didn't have any idea of wearing it on this beautiful day. The fact was, Teddy and Nancy were disagreeing. But there really wasn't anything unusual about that, for their natures were different, they saw things differently, and if they had been polite enough to agree they would simply have been fooling each other.

Nancy smiled lovingly, however, at the boy, as he banged the door. What a darling Ted was! So honest and so scrappy! Of all things hateful to Nancy Brandon a "sissy" boy, as she described a certain type, was the worst.

"But I suppose," she ruminated serenely, "the old breakfast dishes have got to be done." Another lifting up and setting down of a couple of china pieces, but further than that Nancy made not the slightest headway. A small mirror, hung in a small hall between the long kitchen and the store. Here Nancy betook herself and proceeded again to pat her dark hair.

She was the type of girl described as willowy, because that word is prettier than some others that might mean tall, lanky, boneless and agile. Nancy had black hair that shone with crow-black luster in spite of its pronounced curl. Her eyes were dark, snappy and meaningful. They could mean love, as when Ted slammed the door, or they could mean danger, as when a boy kicked the black and white kitten. Then again they could mean devotion, as when Nancy beheld her idolized little mother who was a business woman as well, and in that capacity, Nancy's model.

A tingle at the bell that was set for the store alarm, sent the girl dancing away from the looking-glass.

"Funniest thing about a store," she told herself, "there's always someone to buy things you haven't got."

The catch was on the screen door and, as Nancy approached it, she discerned outside, the figure of an elderly woman. It was Miss Sarah Townsend from whom her mother had bought the store.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Townsend. I keep the door fastened when I'm alone, as I might be busy in the kitchen," apologized Nancy.

"That's right, dear, that's right. And I wouldn't be too much alone if I were you," cautioned the woman who was stepping in with the air of proprietorship, and with her little brown dog sniffing at her heels. "Don't you keep your brother with you?"

"Ted? Oh yes, sometimes. But he's a little boy, you know, Miss Townsend, and he must enjoy his vacation." Nancy was making friends with Tiny, the dog, but after a polite sniff or two Tiny was off frisking about happily, as any dog might be expected to do when returning to his old-time home.

Miss Townsend surveyed Nancy critically.

"Of course your brother is a little boy," she said, "but what about you? You're only a little girl."

"Little! Why I'm much stronger than Ted, and years older," declared Nancy, pulling herself up to her fullest height.

The woman smiled tolerantly. She wore glasses so securely fixed before her deep-set eyes that they seemed like a very feature of her face. She was a capable looking, elderly woman, and rather comely, but she was, as Nancy had quickly observed, "hopelessly old-fashioned."

"We haven't anything fixed up yet," said Nancy apologetically. "You see, mother goes to business and that leaves the store and the house to me."

"Yes. She explained in taking our place that she was doing it to give you a chance to try business. But for a girl so young—Come back here, Tiny," she ordered the sniffing, snuffing, frisky little dog.

"If I'm going to be a business woman I've got to start in," interrupted Nancy. "They say it's never too early to start at *housework.*"

"But that's different. Every girl has to know how to keep house," insisted Miss Townsend. She was busy straightening a box of spools that lay upon the little counter, but from her automatic actions it was perfectly evident that Miss Townsend didn't know she was doing anything.

"I can't see why," retorted Nancy. "Just look at mother. What would she have done with us if she hadn't understood business?"

Miss Townsend sighed. "Being a widow, my dear—"

"But I may be a widow too," breezed Nancy. "In fact I'm sure to, for everyone says I'm so much like mother. Do let me fix that box of spools, Miss Townsend. Someone came in for linen thread last night and Teddy looked for it. I'm sure he gave them a ball of cord, for all the cord was scattered around too." She put the cover on the thread box. "Boys are rather poor at business, I think, especially boys of Teddy's age," orated the important Nancy.

Miss Townsend agreed without saying so. She was looking over the little place in a fidgety, nervous way. Nancy quickly decided this was due to regret that she had given the place up, and therefore sought to make her feel at ease.

The little brown dog had curled himself up in front of the fireplace on a piece of rug, evidently his own personal property. The fireplace was closed up and the stove set back against it, out of the way for summer, and handy-by for winter.

Nancy smiled at the woman who was moving about in a sort of aimless restlessness.

"It must seem natural to you to be around here," Nancy ventured.

"Yes, after thirty years—"

"Thirty years!" repeated Nancy, incredulously. "Did you and your brother live here all that time?"

"Yes." A prolonged sigh brought Miss Townsend down on the old hickory chair that stood by the door, just out of the way of possible customers.

"Brother Elmer and I kept on here after mother died. In fact, so far as I was concerned, we might have gone on until we died, but there was a little trouble—"

"Just like me and my brother, I suppose," intervened Nancy, kindly. "We love each other to death, and yet we are always scrapping."

"In children's way, but that's different, very different," insisted Miss Townsend. "With me and Elmer," she sighed again, "it became a very, very serious matter."

"Oh," faltered Nancy. Things were becoming uncomfortable. That kitchen work would be growing more formidable, and Nancy had really wanted to settle the store. She would love to do that, to put all the little things in their places, or in new places, as she would surely find a new method for their arrangement. She hurried over to the corner shelves.

"I hope no one comes in until I get the place fixed up," she remarked. "Mother doesn't intend to buy much new stock until she sees how we get along."

"That's wise," remarked Miss Townsend. "I suppose I know every stick in the place," she looked about critically, "and yet I could be just as interested. I wonder if you wouldn't like me to help you fix things up? I'd just love to do it."

Now this was exactly what Nancy did not want. In fact, she was wishing earnestly that the prim Miss Townsend would take herself off and leave her to do as she pleased.

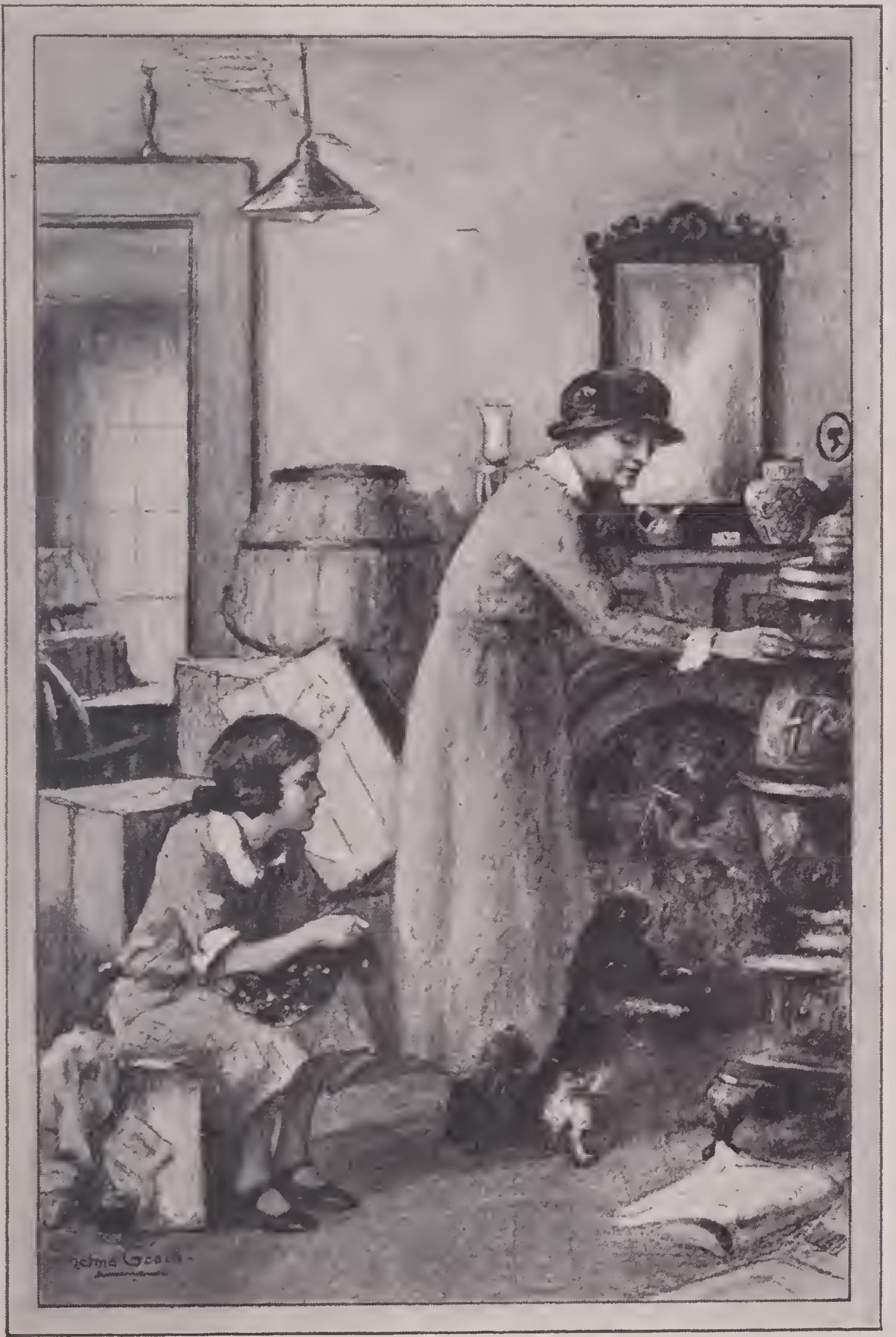
"That's kind of you, I'm sure," she said, "but the idea was that I should be manager from the start," Nancy laughed lightly to justify this claim, "and I'm sure mother would be better pleased if I put the shop in order. You can come in and see me again when I'm all fixed up," (this gentle hint was tactful, thought Nancy) "and then you can tell me what you think of me as the manager of the Whatnot Shop."

Miss Townsend was actually poking in the corner near the hearth shelf where matches, in a tin container, were kept. She heard Nancy but did not heed her.

"Looking for something?" the girl asked a little sharply.

"Looking?" Yes, that is—Tiny keep down there," she ordered. "I can't see what has got into that dog of late. It was one of the things that Elmer and I were constantly fussing over. Tiny won't let any one touch things near this chimney without barking his head off. Now just watch."

As she went to the shelf back of the stove the dog sprang alongside of her. He barked in the happy fashion that goes with rapid tail wagging, and Nancy quickly decided that the dog knew a secret of the old chimney.


Thelma Gooch

Miss Townsend pretended to take things out of the stove.

Again Miss Townsend pretended to take things out of the stove, and Tiny all but jumped into the low, broad door.

"Now, isn't that—uncanny?" asked the woman, plainly bewildered.

"Oh, no, I don't think so," said Nancy. "All dogs have queer little tricks like that."

"Do they? I'm glad to hear you say so," sighed Miss Townsend, once more picking up a small box of notions. "You must excuse me, my dear. You see the habit of a life time—"

"Oh, that's all right, Miss Townsend, I didn't mean to hurry you," spoke up Nancy. "But the morning goes so quickly, and mother may come home to lunch." This possibility brought real anxiety to Nancy. If she had only slicked up the kitchen instead of arguing with Teddy. After all the plagued old housework did take some time, she secretly admitted.

But Miss Townsend laid down the unfinished roll of lace edging, although she had most carefully rolled all but a very small end, walked over to Nancy, who was just attempting to dust out a tray, and in the most tragic voice said:

"Nancy, I think you really have a lot of sense."

Nancy chuckled. "I hope so, Miss Townsend.

"I mean to say, that I think you can be trusted."

"Well," stammered Nancy, forcing back another chuckle, "I hope so, to that too, Miss Townsend." She was surprised at the woman's manner and puzzled to understand its meaning. The dog was again snoozing on the rug.

"Let's sit down," suggested Miss Townsend.

"Oh, all right," faltered Nancy, in despair now of ever catching up on the delayed work.

"You see, it's this way," began the woman, making room for herself in the big chair that was serving as storage quarters for Teddy's miscellany. "Some people are very proud—"

Nancy was simply choking with impatience.

"I mean to say, they are so proud they won't or can't ever give in to each other."

"Stubborn," suggested Nancy. "I'm that way sometimes."

"And brother and sister," sighed Miss Townsend. "I never could believe that Elmer, my own brother, could, be so—unreasonable."

"Why, what's the matter?" Nancy spoke up. "You seem so unhappy."

"Unhappy is no name for it, I'm wretched." The distress shown on Miss Townsend's face was now unmistakable. Nancy forgot even the unwashed breakfast dishes.

"Can I help you?" she asked kindly.

"Yes, you can. What I want is to come in here sometimes—"

"Why, if you're lonely for your old place," interrupted Nancy.

"It isn't that. In fact I just can't explain," said Miss Townsend, picking up her hand bag, nervously. "But I'm no silly woman. We've agreed to sell this place to your mother and I'm the last person in the world to make a nuisance of myself."

"You needn't worry about that," again Nancy intervened, sympathetically.

"You are a kind girl, Nancy Brandon, and I guess your mother has made no mistake in buying the Whatnot Shop for you. You'll be sure to make friends, and that's what counts next to bargains, in business," declared the woman, who had risen from the big chair and was staring at Nancy in the oddest way.

"If I had a chance—" again the woman paused and bit her thin lip. She seemed to dread what she evidently must say.

"I'll be busy here tomorrow," suggested Nancy briskly, "and then perhaps you would like to help me. But I really would like to get the rough dirt out first. Then we can put things to rights."

"The fact is," continued Miss Townsend, without appearing to hear Nancy's suggestion, "I have a suspicion."

"A suspicion? About this—store?"

"Yes, and about my brother. He's an old man and we've never had any real trouble before, but I'm sorry to say, I can't believe he's telling me the truth about an important matter. That is, it's a very important matter to me."

"Oh," said Nancy lamely. She was beginning to have doubts of Miss Townsend's mental balance.

"No, Elmer is a good man. He's been a good brother, but there are some things—" (a long, low, breathful sigh,) "some things we have individual opinions about. And, well, so you won't think me queer if I ask you to let me tidy the shop?"

"Why—no, of course not, Miss Townsend."

"Thank you, thank you, Nancy Brandon," emotion was choking her words. She was really going now and Tiny with her.

"And perhaps it would be just as well not to say anything about it if my brother should drop in," concluded the strange woman.

"Oh, do you suppose he will?" asked bewildered Nancy. "I mean, will he drop in?"

"He's apt to. Elmer is a creature of habit and he's been around here a long time, you know." The dark eyes were glistening behind the gold framed glasses. Miss Townsend was still preparing to depart.

Nancy opened the screen door and out darted Tiny.

"Good-bye, my dear, for the present," murmured Miss Townsend, "and I hope you and your mother and your brother will—be happy—here," she choked on the words and Nancy had an impression of impending tears. "We wouldn't have sold out, we *shouldn't* have sold out, but for Elmer Townsend's foolishness."

Back went the proud head until the lace collar on Sarah Townsend's neck was jerked out of place, a rare thing indeed to happen to that prim lady.

"Good-bye," said Nancy gently, "and come again, Miss Townsend."

"Yes, yes, dear, I shall."

# CHAPTER II

## DINNER DIFFICULTIES

NANCY jerked her cretonne apron first one way and then the other. Then she kicked out a few steps, still pondering. When Nancy was thinking seriously she had to be acting. This brought her to the conclusion that she should hurry out to the porch and look after Miss Townsend, but she had decided upon that move too late, for the lady in the voile dress was just turning the corner into Bender Street.

Nancy's face was a bed of smiles. They were tucked away in the corners of her mouth, they blinked out through her eyes and were having lots of fun teasing her two deep cheek dimples. She was literally all smiles.

"What a lark! Won't Ted howl? The dog and the—the chimney secret," she chuckled. "And dogs know. You can't fool them." She came back into the store and gazed ruefully at the squatty stove that mutely stood guard.

"I don't suppose mother will want that left there all summer," Nancy further considered. "It might just as well be put out in the shed, and the store would look lots better."

She could not help thinking of Miss Townsend's strange visit. The lady was unmistakably worried, and her worry surely had to do with the Whatnot Shop.

"But I do hope we don't run into any old spooky stories about this place," Nancy pondered, "for mother hates that sort of thing and so do I—if they're the foolish, silly kind," she admitted, still staring at the questionable fireplace.

"What-ever can Miss Townsend want to be around here for? No hidden treasures surely, or she would say so and start in to dig them up," decided the practical Nancy. The clock struck one!

"One o'clock!" she said this aloud. "Of course it isn't," laughed the girl. "That clock has been going since the moving and it hasn't unpacked its strike carefully. But, just the same, it must be eleven o'clock, and as for the morning's work! However shall I catch up?"

One hour later Ted was in looking for lunch. He had been out "exploring" and had, he explained, met some fine fellows who were "brigand scouts."

"I'm goin' to join," he declared. "They're goin' to let me in and I'm goin' to bring a lot of my things over to the den."

"Den?" questioned Nancy. "Where's that?"

"Secret," answered Ted. "An' anyhow, it isn't for girls." This was said in a pay-you-back manner that Nancy quickly challenged.

"Oh, all right. Very well. Just as you say, keep it secret if you like," she taunted, "but I've got a real one." The potatoes were burning but neither of the children seemed to care.

Ted looked closely at his sister and was convinced. She really was serious. Then too, everything was on end, no dinner ready, nothing done, the place all boxes, just as they were when he left. Something must have been going on all morning, reasoned Ted.

"Good thing mother didn't come home, Sis," he remarked amicably. "Say, how about—chow?"

"Chow?"

"Yes. Don't you know that means food in the military, and I'm as starved as a bear."

"Well, why don't you get something to eat? I understood we were to camp, share and share alike," Nancy reminded him, giving the simmering potatoes a shake that sent the little pot-cover flying to the floor.

"That was your idea. But mother said you had to be sure we ate our meals," contended Ted. "I'll get the meat. It's meat balls, isn't it?"

"It will be, I suppose, when *I* make them," said Nancy, deliberately shoving everything from one end of the table with a sweep that rattled together dishes, glasses and various other breakable articles.

There was no doubt about it, Nancy Brandon did hate housework. Every thing she did was done with that degree of scorn absolutely fatal to the result. Perhaps this was just why her mother was allowing her to try out the pet summer scheme.

"I'd go mad if I had to stick in a kitchen," Nancy declared theatrically. "I'm so glad we've got the store."

"But we can't eat the store," replied Ted. "Here's the meat. Do get it going, Sis. I've got to get back to the fellows."

"Ted Brandon! You've got to help *me* this afternoon. Do you think, for one instant, I'm going to do everything?"

" 'Course not, I'll do my share," promised the unsuspecting boy. "But just today we've got something big on. Here's the meat."

"Big or little you have just got to help me, Ted. Look at this place! It seems to me things walk out of the boxes and heap themselves up all over. Now, we didn't take those pans out, did we?"

"I don't know, don't think so. But here's a good one. It's the meat kind, isn't it?"

"Yes. Give it here." Nancy took from his hand a perfectly flat iron griddle. "I'll fix up the cakes if you make place on the table. We'll eat out here."

"All right." Ted flew to the task. "But you know, Sis, mother said we might eat in that sun porch. It's a dandy place to read. Look at the windows."

Nancy had flattened the chopped meat into four balls and was pressing them on the griddle.

"There. What did you do with the potatoes?"

"Nothing. I didn't take them."

"But we had potatoes—" She lighted the gas under the meat.

"Sure. I smelled them burning."

"Well, hunt around and see if you can smell them now," ordered Ted's sister. "I can't eat meat without potatoes."

Ted dropped his two plates and actually went sniffing about in search of the lost food. Meanwhile Nancy was standing at the stove, a magazine in one hand and the griddle handle in the other. Her eyes, however, were not upon the griddle.

Presently the meat was sizzling and its odor cheered Ted considerably.

"Don't let's mind the potatoes," he suggested. "I can't find them."

"Can't find them? And I peeled three! We've *got* to find them."

"Then you look and I'll stir the meat."

"It doesn't have to be stirred." But Nancy stood over the stove just the same.

"Then what are you watching it for?"

"So it won't burn, like the potatoes."

"Maybe they all burned up." Ted didn't care much for potatoes.

"Oh, don't be silly. Where's the pan?"

"Which pan?"

"Oh, Ted Brandon! The potato pan, of course!"

"Oh, Nancy Brandon! What potato pan, of course! Has it got a name on it?"

Nancy dropped her magazine on a littered chair, in sheer disgust. She realized the meat was cooking; (it splattered and spluttered merrily on the shallow griddle,) and she too was hungry. Ted might be satisfied to eat just bread and meat, but she simply had to have freshly cooked potatoes. Wasn't housework awful? Especially cooking?

There was a jangle of the store bell, actually some one coming at that critical moment.

"Oh, dear!" groaned Nancy. "What a nuisance! I suppose I'll have to go—"

"But the meat?" Ted was getting desperate.

"It's almost ready." Nancy wiped her hands on the dish towel and hurried to the store.

"A man!" she announced, as she went to open the screen door.

Ted left his post and cautiously stole after her. A customer was a real novelty and Ted didn't want to miss the excitement. A pleasant voice filled in the moment. A gentleman was talking to Nancy.

"I'm glad to find some one in," he was saying. "Since my friend, Elmer Townsend, left here I've been rather—that is, I've missed the little place," explained the man. Ted could see that he was very tall and looked, he thought, like a school teacher, having no hat on and not much hair either.

"We've just been unpacking," Nancy replied. She was conscious of the confusion in the store as well as she had been of things upset in the kitchen.

"Oh, yes," drawled the man, stepping behind the counter. "It will take you some time to go over everything. But you see, Mr. Townsend and I are great friends, and I know where most of the things are kept. You don't mind if I take a look for a ball of twine?"

"No, certainly not," agreed Nancy.

"I can get you that," spoke up Ted. "I had it out last night," and he jumped behind the counter to the littered cord and twine box.

Nancy pulled herself up to that famous height of hers. She smelled—something burning!

"Ted!" she screamed. "It's a-fire! The kitchen! I see the blaze!"

"The meat!" yelled Ted, springing over the low counter and following his sister toward the smoke filling place.

"Oh-h-h-!" Nancy continued to yell. "What shall we do!"

"Don't get excited," ordered the stranger. "And don't go near that blazing pan. Let me go in there," and he brushed Nancy aside making his way into the untidy place, which now seemed, to the frightened girl, all in flames.

"The meat—gosh!" moaned poor Ted, for the stranger had opened the back door, and having grabbed the flaming pan with that same towel Nancy had tossed on the chair, he was now tossing the blazing pan as far out from the house as his best fling permitted.

"There!" he exclaimed, brushing one hand with the other. "I guess we're safe now."

"Oh, thank you, Mister, Mister—" Nancy waited for him to supply the name, but he only smiled broadly.

"Just call me Sam," he said pleasantly.

"Sam?" echoed Ted.

"Yes, sonny. Isn't that all right?" asked the stranger.

They were within the cluttered kitchen now and, as is usually the case with girls of Nancy's temperament, she was much distressed at the looks of the place. In fact, she was making frantic but futile efforts to right things.

"What's the matter with Sam?" again asked the man, curiously.

"Oh, nothing," replied Ted. "Only it isn't your name."

"No? How do you know?" persisted the stranger, quizzically.

"You don't look like a Sam," said Ted, kicking one heel against the other to hide his embarrassment. He hadn't intended saying all that.

The man laughed heartily, and for the moment Nancy forgot the upset kitchen. But the dinner!

"I hope your dinner isn't gone," remarked the stranger who wanted to be called Sam.

"Oh, no," replied Nancy laconically, avoiding Ted's discouraged look. "That was only some—some meat we were cooking."

"Can't keep house and 'tend store without spoiling something. But I feel it was somewhat my fault. Suppose we lock up and trot down to the corner for a dish of ice cream?" he suggested. "It's just warm enough today for cream; don't you think so?"

"Oh, let's!" chirped Ted. A hungry boy is ever an object of pity.

"You go," suggested Nancy, "but I think I had better stay here."

"Oh, no. You've got to come along. Let me see. If you call me Uncle Sam what shall I call you?"

"I'm Nancy Brandon and this is my brother Ted," replied Nancy. "But I'd like much better to call you by your real name."

"Real name," and he laughed again. "I see we are going to be critical friends. Now then, since you insist Sam won't do suppose we make it Sanders. Mr. Sanders. How does that name suit?" and he clapped Ted's shoulders jovially.

"Then Mr. Sanders, you and Ted go along and get your cream. I really must attend to things here," insisted Nancy. "We are all so upset and mother will expect us to have things in some sort of order."

"Oh, Sis, come along," begged Ted. "I'll help you when we get back. It won't take a minute."

Hunger is a poor argument against food, and presently the back door was locked, the front door was locked, and the two Brandons with the man who called himself Mr. Sanders, because they refused to call him Uncle Sam, were making tracks for the ice cream store.

Burnt potatoes, burnt meat with ice cream for dessert, thought Nancy. But she was still convinced that business was more important than housekeeping.

"Glad we didn't burn up," remarked Ted, as he trotted along beside Mr. Sanders.

"Never want to throw water on burning grease," they were advised. "And always keep a thing at full arm's length, if you must pick it up. Of course, if you turned out the gas and pushed the pan well in on the stove it would eventually burn out, but think of the smoke!"

"You bet!" declared Ted, as they reached the little country ice cream parlor. Two girls, whom Nancy had seen several times since she came to Long Leigh, were just leaving the place and she thought they looked at her very curiously as they passed out. Then, she distinctly heard one of them say:

"Fancy! With him!"

And Nancy knew she had made some sort of mistake in accepting the well-intentioned invitation.

# CHAPTER III

## BELATED HASTE

Instinctively Nancy sought a sheltered corner of the ice cream room. She was greatly embarrassed to have come along the road with a stranger whom she knew nothing about, and now she was determined to leave him alone with Teddy. There must be something odd about him, to have drawn that remark from the girls. Nancy looked at him critically from her place below the decorated looking glass, and decided he did appear queer to her.

"But I'm just starved," she told herself, "and I've got to have something to eat." The girl in the gingham dress, with a great wide muslin apron, took an order for cake and cream and a glass of milk. Fortunately, Nancy had her purse along with her. That much, at least, she had already learned about being a business woman.

Teddy was chatting gaily with the man down near the door. They seemed to be having a great time over their stories, and Nancy rightly suspected the stories concerned Ted's favorite sport, camping.

She ate her lunch rather solemnly. Everything seemed to be going wrong, but the escape from fire, with the frying meat on a shallow griddle, was surely something to be thankful for.

Oh, well! Only half a day had been lost, and she really couldn't have done more when Miss Townsend took all that precious time with her lamentations.

Miss Townsend! Nancy sipped the last of her milk as she reflected on the little dog's interest in the old fireplace. Of course, Miss Townsend would come again, and Tiny would always be along with her. And Nancy hadn't yet told Ted about that experience.

"Just buying a country store didn't seem to mean buying a lot of freaks along with the bargain," Nancy speculated. "And now here's Mr. Baldy who wants to be called after Uncle Sam, going right in back of my counter and helping himself—"

"Ready, Sis!" called out Teddy, as he waited for Mr. Sanders to pay his bill.

"You go along, Ted," called back Nancy. "I've got to stop some place, but I'll be there in time to open the door for you."

Ted never questioned one of those queer decisions of Nancy's. He knew how useless such a thing would be; so off he went with the man in the short sleeved shirt, while Nancy tarried long enough to give them a fair start.

Then, easily finding a way through the fields, she raced off herself, although getting through thick hedges and climbing an occasional rail fence, proved rather tantalizing.

In front of the store she found Mr. Sanders just leaving Ted. They were both talking and laughing as if the acquaintance had proved highly satisfactory, but it irritated Nancy.

"Now, I suppose, *he'll* come snooping around," she grumbled. "Well, there's one thing certain, I'm not going to keep an old-fashioned country store. No hanging around my cracker barrels," she told herself, although there was not, and likely never would be a cracker barrel in the Whatnot Shop.

Once more left to themselves, the burnt dinner was not referred to, as Ted helped at last to clear up the disordered kitchen. Not even the lost poatoes came in for mention as brother and sister "made things fly," as most belated workers find themselves obliged to do.

"Here, Ted, get the broom."

Ted grabbed the broom.

"No, let me sweep. You empty those baskets of excelsior."

"Where?"

"Where?"

"Yes. Can we burn it?"

"No, never. No more fire for us,"

groaned Nancy. "Just dump the stuff some where."

"But we can't, Sis," objected Ted. "Mother 'specially said nothing could be dumped around."

"Well, do anything you like with it, but just get it out of the way," and Nancy's excited broom made jabs and stabs at corners without quite reaching them.

Ted was much more methodical. He really would do things right, if only Nancy would give him a chance. Just now he was carefully packing the excelsior in a big clothes basket.

"You know, Nan," he remarked, "Mr. Sanders is awfully funny."

"How funny?" asked Nancy crisply.

"Oh, he knows an awful lot."

"He ought to, he's bald headed," answered Nancy, implying there-by that Mr. Sanders was an old man and ought to be wise.

"Is he?" asked Ted innocently.

"For lands sake! Ted Brandon!" exclaimed Nancy. "Can't you think what you're saying? Is he what?"

The thread of the argument thus entirely lost, Ted just crammed away at the excelsior.

"I'm just dying to get at the store," said Nancy next. "I want to fix that all up so that mother will buy more things to put in stock."

"She's going to bring home fishing rods. I'm goin' to have a corner for sport stuff, you know," Ted reminded the whirl-wind Nancy.

"Oh, yes, of course, that's all right. But we'll have to see which corner we can spare best. The store isn't any too big, is it?"

"Big enough," agreed the affable boy. "And I'll bet, Nan, we'll have heaps of sport around here this summer. There's fine fellows over by the big hill. That's more of a summer place than this is, I guess."

"Where does your friend Uncle Sam live?"

"You mean Mr. Sanders. Why, he didn't say, but he went up the hill toward that old stone place."

"Yes. I wouldn't wonder but he would live in an old stone place," echoed Nancy sarcastically.

"Why, don't you like him?"

"Like him?"

"I mean—do you hate him?" laughed Ted. His basket was filled and he was gathering up the loose ends of the splintered fibers upon a tin cover.

"I don't like him and I don't hate him, but I do hope he won't come snooping around *my* store," returned Nancy.

Teddy stopped short with a frying pan raised in mid air. He swung it at an imaginary ball, then put it down in the still packed peach basket.

"Now, Nan," he protested, "don't you go kickin' up any fuss about Mr. Sanders. He always came around here; he's a great friend of the Townsends'."

"Ted Brandon!" Nancy flirted the dust

brush at the gas stove, "do you thing I am going to take all that with this store? Did we buy all the Townsends' old—old cronies along with the Whatnot Shop?"

"There's someone," Ted interrupted, as the store bell jangled timidly.

"Oh, you go please, Ted," begged Nancy, who had glimpsed girls' skirts without. "I'm too untidy to tend store this afternoon."

# CHAPTER IV

## NEW FRIENDS

Nancy never looked as untidy as she really felt. In fact, she always looked "interesting and human," as her friends might say, but she was sensitive about the disorder she pretended to despise. Now, here were those two girls! She simply could not go in the store as she looked.

"You're all right," Ted insisted, as they both listened to the jangling bell. "You look good in that yellow dress."

"Good?" she took time to correct. "You mean—something else. And it isn't yellow," she countered. "But please, Ted, you go. There's a dear. I'll do something for you—"

Ted started off dutifully. "But I won't know," he argued.

"Run along, like a dear," whispered Nancy, for persons were now within the store, she could easily hear them talking and could even see their reflections in the little hall mirror.

Ted went. He was such a good-natured boy, and Nancy was glad to notice once more "so good-looking."

After exchanging a few questions and answers with the girls in the store, Ted was presently back again in the kitchen.

"Blue silk!" he sort of hissed at Nancy. "They want—*blue silk.*"

"We haven't any. Tell them we're out of it."

Ted went forth with a protest.

A few seconds later he again confronted Nancy.

"Blue *twist* then. What ever on earth is blue *twist?*"

"We haven't any!" Nancy told him sharply. "We're all out of sewing stuff, except black and white."

"Oh, you come on. They're just laughin' at me. It's your store. You go ahead and 'tend it." Ted was on a strike now. He wasn't going to be that kind of store keeper. Twist and silk!

"But I'm so dirty," complained Nancy, brushing at her skirt and then patting her disordered hair. She had been rushing around at a mad rate since noon hour and naturally felt untidy.

"Well, any how, go tell them," suggested Ted. "They're just girls like you. You needn't worry about your looks." His eyes paid Nancy a decided compliment with the careless speech. Evidently she was not the only one who found good looks in the family.

Out in the store the girls were waiting, and when she finally walked up to them, Nancy was instantly at ease.

"Oh, hello!" greeted the stouter one. She was genuinely pleasant and Nancy at once liked her. "You're the girl we've been trying to meet. This is Vera Johns and I'm Ruth Ashley. We live over on North Road and we've been wanting to meet you."

"I'm Nancy Brandon," replied Nancy pleasantly, "and I'm glad to meet you, too.

I was wondering if I would get acquainted away out here. Won't you sit down? Here's a bench,'' brushing aside the papers. ''It takes so long to get things straightened out.''

The girls murmured their understanding of the moving problem, and after Teddy had called out from the back door, that he was going ''over to see the fellows,'' all three girls settled down to chat.

''Is it really your own store?'' asked Ruth. She had reddish-brown hair, gray eyes and the brightest smile.

''Yes,'' replied Nancy. ''Just a little summer experiment. You see, I perfectly despise housework and mother believes I should learn something practical. I just begged for a little country store. I've always been so interested reading about them.''

''How quaint!'' murmured Vera Johns. Her tone of voice seemed so affected that Nancy glanced quickly at her. Was she fooling? Could any girl mean so senseless a remark as "How quaint!" to Nancy's telling of her practical experiment?

"Do you mean," murmured Nancy, "why, just—how quaint?"

"Yes, isn't it?" Vera again sort of lisped. At this Nancy was convinced. Vera was that sort of girl. She would be apt to say any silly little thing that had the fewest words in it. Just jerky little exclamations, such as Nancy's mother had taught her to avoid as affectations.

Vera's hair was of a toneless blonde hue, cut "classic" and plastered down like that of an Egyptian slave. Her eyes, Nancy noticed were a faded blue, and her form—Nancy hoped that she, being tall herself, did not sag at all corners, as did Vera Johns.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," chimed in Ruth, "to have a chance really to try out business. Just as you say, Nancy, we learn to wash doll dishes as soon as we can reach a kitchen chair. Then why shouldn't we learn to make and count pennies as early as we possibly can?"

"Do you hate housework too, Ruth?" Nancy asked, hoping for the joy of finding a mutual understanding. "Are you also anxious to try business?"

"I hate housework, abhor it," admitted Ruth, dimpling prettily, "but mother says we just have to get used to it, so we won't know we're doing it. You would be surprised, Nancy, how easy it is to wash dishes and dream of babbling brooks."

"Really!" That was Vera again. "I adore dishes, but I won't dream of bobbling brooks, ever."

"Bobbling," repeated Ruth. "That's good, Vera. I suppose they bobble more than they babble. But I guess you're not much of a dreamer, Vera," she finished, in a doubtful compliment.

Nancy was amused. Ruth was going to be "good fun" and Vera was already proving a pretty good joke. Their acquaintance was surely promising, and Nancy responded fittingly.

She had time to notice in detail each of these new friends. Ruth was dimply and just fat enough to be happily plump. She also was correspondingly sunny in her disposition. She wore her hair twisted into three or four "Spring Maids" and it gave her the effect of short, curled hair. Her summer dress was a simple blue ratine, and Nancy admired it frankly.

Vera was affected in manner, in style, in dress and every way. Her hair was so arranged Nancy couldn't be sure just how it was done, but it looked like a model in a hairdresser's window. Also, she wore, bound around it a Roman ribbon, with a wonderful assortment of rainbow colors. Her costume was sport, with a very fancy jacket and a light silk and wool plaid skirt. That she had plenty of money was rather too obviously apparent, and Nancy wondered just how she and Ruth were connected.

They were inspecting the newly acquired little store.

"And you are the manager, the proprietor—"

"The clerk and the cashier," Nancy interrupted Ruth. "I've always loved to play store, so now, mother says, she hopes I'll be satisfied. But this is a very old-timey place. I don't see how the Townsends ever made it pay."

"Miss Townsend is a queer old lady," replied Ruth. "I guess of late years they didn't have to worry about making things pay in the store."

"Why Ruthie!" exclaimed Vera. "Don't you know every body says they went bankrupt?"

"Oh, that," laughed Ruth. "I guess Mr. Townsend lent out his money and couldn't get it back handy."

"But he and his sister had a perfectly desperate fight over it," insisted Vera, eyes wide with curious interest.

"Desperate," repeated Ruth, as if trying to give Nancy a cue to Vera's queer vocabulary. "I can imagine their sort of desperate fight. Sister Sarah would say to Brother Elmer: 'Elmer dear, you really can't mean a thing like that,' " imitated Ruth, "and Brother Elmer would clasp and unclasp his thin hands as he replied: 'I'm sorry, Sister Sarah, but it looks that way.' "

Ruth and Nancy laughed merrily as the little sketch ended.

"That's about how desperate those two would fight," Ruth declared.

"Then why did they sell out?" demanded Vera. "Every body knows they lost everything."

"We haven't actually bought the place," Nancy explained, "just have an option on it. You see, we had to go to the country every summer, and mother thought this might suit us. It is so convenient for her to commute, and Ted and I can't get into a lot of mischief in a place like this. So it seems, at least," she hastened to add.

"Well, if you let your brother go around with that queer old fellow we saw him with today, he may get into mischief," intimated Vera, mysteriously, with a wag of her bobbed head.

"Mr. Sanders? What's the matter with Mr. Sanders?" demanded Nancy, rather sharply.

"Oh talk, talk, and gossip," Ruth interposed. "Just because he sees fit to keep his business to himself—"

"You know perfectly well, Ruth, that is more than gossip," insisted Vera.

"What is? What's the mystery?" again demanded Nancy, dropping her box of lead pencils rather suddenly.

"Well," drawled Vera, getting up with a tantalizing deliberateness, "if you were to see a person in front of you one minute and have him vanish the next—"

A peal of laughter from Nancy broke in rudely upon Vera's recitation.

"All right," Vera added, in a hurt tone. "Don't believe me if you don't want to, but just wait and see."

"Disappearing Dick?" chanted Nancy gaily. "Do you mean to say he's one of those so-called miracle men?"

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort," protested

Ruth. “But there is something—different about him. A lot of people say he does disappear, but of course, there’s nothing uncanny about it. It’s probably just clever,” Ruth tried to explain.

“Rather,” drawled Vera.

And Nancy could not suppress an impolite but insistent chuckle.

## CHAPTER V

### ORIGINAL PLANS

During the next half hour the girls busied themselves playing store. Ruth was almost as keenly interested in the little place as was Nancy, herself, but it was noticeable that Vera was more curious. She poked into the farthest corners, even opening obscure little cubby-holes that Nancy had not yet discovered. All the while they talked about the Townsends and the mysterious Mr. Sanders, declaring that something around the Whatnot Shop held the clue to the Townsend disagreement, and Mr. Sanders' mysterious power of disappearing.

"I think it's the funniest thing," ruminated Nancy, clapping the wrong cover on the white thread box, "here we came away out here to be peaceful, quiet and studious. Mother looked for a place just to keep Ted and me busy, and then we run into a regular hornet's nest of rumors."

"Don't you know," replied Ruth, "that still waters run deepest?"

"But I didn't know we had to take on a whole Mother Goose set of fairy tales with a little two cent shoe-string shop," protested Nancy. "Of course it will serve me right if I get into an awful squall. My rebellion against the long-loved house-work idea, is sure to get me into some trouble, isn't it?"

"Who doesn't rebel secretly?" admitted Ruth. "Isn't it fairer to up and say so than to be always hoping the dishpan will spring a leak, and dish-towels will blow away?" Ruth was making rapid strides in gaining Nancy's affection. She was so unaffected, so frank, and so sensible.

Vera wasn't saying much but she was poking a lot. Just now she was fussing with some discarded and disabled toys. She held up a helpless windmill.

"Imagine!" she said, simply.

"Well, what of it?" asked Ruth. "It was pretty—once!"

"Pretty! As if anyone around here would ever buy a thing like that."

"Let me see it," Nancy said. "I'm sure Ted would love 'a thing like that.' He'd spend days tinkering with it." Nancy took the red and blue tin toy and inspected it critically. As she wound a tiny key a little bell tinkled.

"Lovel-lee!" cried Ruth. "That's a merry wind. Or is it a tinkle-ly wind? Anyway it's cute. Save it for the small brother, Nancy. And I think he's awfully cute. Here's something else for his camp," she offered, handing Nancy over a red, white and blue popgun.

"Great!" declared Nancy. "Ted has been too busy to rummage yet, but he's sure to be thrilled when he does go at it. Yes, I think Ted is cute, and I hope the disappearing man won't cast a spell on him," she finished, laughing at the idea, and meanwhile inspecting the toy windmill.

“You can joke,” warned Vera, “but my grandmother insists that what everyone says must be true, and everyone says Baldy Sanders is freakish.”

“Baldy,” repeated Nancy gaily. “I noticed that. But he has enough of eyes to make up for the lost hair. I never saw such merry twinkling eyes.”

“Really!” Vera commented. “I never notice men’s eyes.”

“Just their bald heads,” teased Ruth. “Now Vera, if Mr. Sanders is a professor, as some folks claim, and if he ever gets our class in chemistry, I’m afraid you would just have to notice his merry, twinkling eyes. Anyhow,” and Ruth cocked up a faded little blue muslin pussy cat, “he’s merry, and that is in his favor. What are you doing with that windmill, Nancy?”

“Inspecting it. It’s a queer kind of windmill. Look at the cross pieces on top and this tin cup.”

All three girls gave their attention to the queer toy. It was, as Nancy had said, different from the usual model. It had cross pieces on top instead of on the side, and one piece was capped off with a metal cup.

"I'll save it for Ted," Nancy concluded. "But I hope it isn't dangerous. It takes boys to find out the worst of everything. Just before we moved, most of our furniture is in storage you know," she put in to explain the scarcity of things at the country place, "Ted went up to the attic and found an old wooden gun. It would shoot peas, and what those boys didn't shoot peas at wasn't worth mentioning. I'll put the freak windmill away for him, though. It looks quite harmless."

"Oh, I think it's just joyous to have a shop," exclaimed Ruth, "and if you'll let me, Nancy, I'll come in and 'tend sometimes."

"I'd love to have you," replied Nancy earnestly. "I did expect my chum, Bonny Davis, to visit me, but she's gone down to the shore first. Bonny's lots of fun. I'm sure you'd like her if she does come," declared Nancy, loyally.

"I like her name," Ruth answered. "What is it? Bonita?"

"No, it's really Charlotte, but she's so black we've always called her Bonny from ebony, you know. Now Vera, what have you discovered?" broke off Nancy, looking over to the corner in which Vera was plainly interested. "Anything spooky?"

"Not spooky," replied Vera, "but I never saw such odd looking fishing things. No wonder the Townsends went bankrupt. Here are boxes and boxes of wires and weights, and I don't know what all. Oh, I'll tell you!" she exclaimed, in a rare burst of enthusiasm. "Let's have a fishing sale?"

"And sell fish!" teased Ruth.

"No," objected Nancy, taking Vera's part. "I think a special sale of fishing and sport supplies would be great. Let's see what we've got toward it."

"It would draw the boys and that's something," joked Ruth. "But I'll tell you what, Nancy, you had better be careful what you try to sell to the young fishermen around here. They're pretty particular and rather good at the sport. I like to fish myself."

"Oh, I'd love to," declared Nancy. "Where do you go?"

"Dyke's pond and sometimes the old mill creek," replied Ruth. "But we only get sunnies there. There's perch in the pond, though."

This led to discussing the fishing prospects in brooks, ponds and other waterways around Long Leigh, until it was being promptly decided that Ruth and Vera should very soon introduce Nancy to the sport. The idea of having a sale of the outfit at the shop was also entered upon enthusiastically, until the afternoon was melting into shadows before the girls realized it.

"But what ever you do," Ruth cautioned Nancy, "don't let any one induce you to take the Whatnot out of the window. That's the sign of this old shop that's known for miles and miles."

"I think a cute little windmill would be lots nicer," suggested Vera. "That Whatnot is—atrocious."

"Windmill!" repeated Ruth. "But we don't sell windmills."

"Certainly not. Neither do we sell Whatnots," contended Vera.

But we sell the things that are on the Whatnot," argued Ruth. "And besides Whatnot stands for *What Not!*"

It was amusing Nancy to listen to their assumed partnership. They were both talking about "*our* shop" and insisting upon what "*we* sell." This established at once a comradeship among all three, and Nancy was convinced that her own desire to go into business was not, after all, very queer. Other girls, no doubt, shared it as well, but the difference was—Nancy's mother. She was the "angel of the enterprise," as Nancy had declared more than once.

"And I'll tell you," confided Vera, quite surprisingly, "if you'll let me, I'll help you with your housework. I don't mind it a bit, and you hate it so."

"Oh, that's just lovely of you, Vera," Nancy replied, while a sense of fear seized her, "but I really must do some of it, you know. Even a good store keeper should know how to cook a little," she pretended, vowing that her house would be in some kind of order before Vera ever even got a peek into the living rooms.

When they were finally gone Nancy stood alone in the little store, too excited to decide at once which way to turn. She liked the girls, especially Ruth, and even Vera had her interesting features. At least she said odd things in an odd way, and her drawl was "delicious," Nancy admitted. Of course she was gossipy. There was all that nonsense about Mr. Sanders. As if any human being could really disappear. Ted would just howl at the idea, Nancy knew, and if the man were really a professor of some sort, that ought to make him interesting, she reflected. At any rate, he was, the girls had said, a friend of the Townsends, and Nancy would make it her business to ask Miss Townsend about him the very next time she came into the store.

Her mind busy with such reflections, Nancy hooked the screen door, (the shop was not yet supposed to be open for business) and turned toward the upset kitchen.

"I've just got to do something with it," she promised, "before mother comes. I wish Ted would hurry along home. Of course, he's a boy and boys don't have to worry about kitchens."

Nevertheless, as Nancy dashed around she did make a real effort to adjust the disordered room, for her pride was now prompting her. Whatever would Vera Johns say to such a looking place? And was all this fair to a mother so thoughtful and so good-natured as was Nancy's?

"I begin right here at this door," she decided, feeling she had to begin at a definite spot, "and I just straighten out every single thing from here to the back door."

Peach baskets idling with the odds and ends of packing, Ted's red sweater, Nancy's blue one, Nancy's straw hat that she felt she must have within reach and which therefore had been "parked" on the floor, safe, however, under a big chair, and a paste-board box of books that she also didn't want to loose track of, the portable phonograph cover, the phonograph itself was reposing safely on the corner of the sink where Ted had been trying a new record; all these and as many more miscellaneous articles Nancy was briefly encountering in her general clearing up plan "from one door to the other."

But she forged on, the old broom doing heroic duty as a plough cutting through the débris. Finally, having gotten most of the stuff into a corner, she undertook to scatter it in a way peculiar to one with business, rather than domestic, instincts.

"I'll need the baskets, all of them, when I'm settling the store," she promptly decided, "and I'll get Ted to put the box of books in there too, so I can read while I'm waiting. Then the phonograph—That can go in there just as well, it may draw customers." At this Nancy laughed, but she picked up the little black box, it had been her birthday present, and put it right on the small table under the old mantle in the store. A phonograph in the store seemed attractive.

"I guess we'll find the store handy for lots of things," Nancy was thinking, for the difference in the size of their old home, and the limits of this new one, was not easy to adjust.

With a sort of flourish of the broom at the papers and bits of excelsior that were still an eyesore about, Nancy at length managed to "make a path," as she expressed it, through the kitchen.

"And I'll gather some flowers to greet mother with," she insisted. "There's no reason why we shouldn't make a pretty room of a kitchen like this, with one, two, three, good sized windows,'' she counted.

But the glorious bunch of early roses must have felt rather out of place, trying to conserve their wondrous perfume from contamination with the remains of a smudgy odor from burnt potatoes—which by-the-way, had not yet come to light, not to say anything of the real fire smell of burnt meat, that ran over from a pan-cake griddle into a seething gas flame.

''Oh, those flowers!'' exhaled the triumphant Nancy, pushing the dishpan away so as not to bend the longest stalk, which was brushed against it. ''Won't mother just love it here?''

After all, is not the soul of the poet more valuable than the skill of a prospective housewife?

# CHAPTER VI

## FAIR PLAY

Mrs. Brandon was such a mother as one might readily imagine would be the parent of Nancy and Ted. In the first place she was young, so young as to be mistaken often for Nancy's big sister. Then she was lively, a real chum with her two children, but more important than these qualities, perhaps, was her sense of tolerance.

Fair play, she called it, believing that the children would more surely and more correctly learn from experience than from continuous preaching. Perhaps this was due to her own experience. She had been a girl much like Nancy. She had not inherited the so-called domestic instinct; no more did Nancy. To that cause was ascribed Nancy's unusual disposition toward business and her dislike for all kitchens.

“Those roses!” she breathed deeply over the scented mass Nancy had gathered. “Aren’t they just um-um? Wonderful?”

“I knew you would like them, mother,” responded Nancy happily. “I’m sorry we couldn’t get things slicked up better today, but we were so constantly interrupted.

“You will be, Nan dear. It is always just like that when business runs into housework.”

“Oh, but say, Mother,” interrupted Ted. “It’s just great here. There’s the best lot of boys. And we’ve got a camp, a regular brigand camp—”

“Look out for mischief, Teddy boy,” replied his mother fondly. “I want you both to have a fine time, but a little mischief goes a long ways toward spoiling things, you know,” she warned, earnestly.

“Oh, I know. I’ll be careful. We won’t have any real guns nor knives, nor swords—”

“Ted Brandon! I should hope not!” cried Nancy. “Real guns and swords and knives, indeed! If you go out playing with that sort of ruffian—"

"But they aren't. We don't have them. No real firearms a-tall," protested Ted. "And the boys are nice fellows."

"But just imagine what I would do if you came in hurt. And mother away and everything," reasoned Nancy foolishly, as if she enjoyed the sensation. "It is not like it was when Anna was with us. Mother," Nancy asked, "don't you really think we should have someone in Anna's place?"

"No, girlie, I don't," promptly replied the mother, who was just taking from the gas oven a deliciously broiled steak. "While we had Anna you never had a chance to find out all the simple things that you didn't know. Anna was an ideal maid, but maids are not educators and none of us can learn without being given a chance. Ted, please get the ice water. And I would try, Nancy, to have every meal, no matter how simple it is, served either on the side porch or in the dining room," counselled Mrs. Brandon.

"Nothing so demoralizes us as upset kitchen meals."

"Yes, mother, I know that," admitted Nancy, who, with her mother nearby for inspection, was daintily arranging the salad. "As a matter of fact, I lose things in the kitchen. Imagine losing the potatoes, pan and all!"

A hearty laugh followed the recalling of Nancy's and Ted's dinner disaster. But even to that accident Mrs. Brandon insisted that her daughter was one of the girls who must learn by experience, so there were no long arguments given to point out her weakness.

"But Anna is coming back, isn't she?" Ted pleaded. A boy wants to be sure of his meals in spite of all the educational processes necessary for training obdurate sisters.

"Yes, dear. I expect she will be back to us in the autumn, and I'm sure she will be benefited by her vacation," said Mrs. Brandon. "Anna does not really have to work now. The salary and light expenses of maids soon place them in a position to retire, you know," she pointed out practically.

"And besides," chimed in Nancy, "it's lots of fun to live all alone for the summer, at least. Why, if Anna were here she would be forever poking in and out of the store, and really mother," Nancy's voice fell to a very serious tone, "when I get things going, I intend to make *you* take a vacation. I'm going to make that store *pay.*"

"That's lovely, girlie," replied the mother, "and I'm sure you and Ted are going to be wonderful little helpers. Now, come eat dinner. You must be ravenous. Here, Nancy, carry along the beans with the butter. Make each hand do its share to help out each foot, you know," she teased.

"But I'm starved," declared Ted, making a rather risky dive for the three dinner plates and hurrying into the little dining room with them. "That ice cream was good while we were eating it, but it doesn't last long, does it, Nan?"

This brought up the story of Mr. Sanders' treat, and as her children related it, each outdoing the other in vivid description and volumes of parentheses, Mrs. Brandon listened with but few interruptions. When the story was told, however, she gave her version of the gossip concerning the stranger.

"He is really a professor, I'm sure," she stated, "for Miss Townsend told me that much. Of course professors can be as queer as other folks—"

"Queer?" interrupted Ted, holding his plate out for another new potato.

"Yes, they are often odd," admitted his mother, smiling at the boy's joke. "But then, too, we expect to depend upon their intelligence for reasonable explanations."

"Mother, anyone would know you were a librarian, the way you talk," said Nancy. "I suppose we act booky too, only we can't realize it ourselves. Ted, your knife is playing toboggan—"

"I'm too starved to notice," said Ted.

"Hope you won't lose the potatoes and burn the meat again, Sis," he added, "I can't stand starvation."

"I didn't do it, *we* did it," insisted Nancy. "I'm sure we were both getting dinner—"

"But about Miss Townsend, dear," her mother forestalled their argument. "Did she say she regretted agreeing to sell?"

"No, mother; that's the queer part of it all," Nancy replied. They were now settled at their meal and could chat happily. "She acted so mysterious about everything. And you should see her little dog, Tiny, sniff around! Honestly, I thought he'd sniff his little stumpy nose off at the fireplace. By the way, mother, can't we have the old stove moved out into the back storeroom? We don't want it standing around all summer waiting for a blizzard next Christmas, do we?"

"No. But I'm afraid we will have to put off that sort of work until my vacation, Nancy. You must remember, dear, we have only agreed to let you run the little store practically as it is, to sell out Miss Townsend's stuff and to give you some experience."

"Oh, yes. I know." said Nancy a little ruefully. "But mother—" she hesitated. Then began again, "Mother, I simply can't have the girls come in and have things so upset, and I won't, positively won't have Miss Townsend fussing around—"

"You can't be rude to her, Nan," the mother said rather decidedly. "And, after all, there is nothing here she doesn't know about."

"Well, there seems to be," sighed Nancy, "or else what did she start right in to search for? And the very first time she met me, too."

"Perhaps her brother lost some papers, or something like that," suggested Mrs. Brandon. "I *do* know he is a little odd in his manner."

"But if it were only that she wouldn't

need to act so mysteriously about it, would she, mother?"

"And the dog," put in Ted. "He couldn't know about papers, could he? Dogs are awfully wise, I know that much, and I'm going to get one—"

Paying no attention to Ted's last sentence, Nancy continued to deplore Miss Townsend's threat of more visits to her shop.

"And the girls, that is Vera, said that she and her brother had a quarrel about the place before they left," Nancy continued. "Vera is talkative, but I could see myself that Miss Townsend was awfully unhappy about something."

"Yes," snapped Ted, again allowing his fork to rest in the prohibited sliding position from his plate, "and she's the one who talks about Mr. Sanders, too. That girl Veera—"

"Vera, Ted. Just like very," said Nancy critically.

"Yeah," groaned Ted. "Just like scary, too. That's what she is, scary. And the fellows say Mr. Sanders is a first-rate scout, a real scout. They say he's even a scoutmaster—"

"Did they say anything about his habit of disappearing?" asked Nancy, quizzically.

"Now, Nan. You know very well that isn't so. It couldn't be. How could any one dis-sa-peer?" inquired Ted, emphatically.

"That wasn't the question, brother," insisted Nancy. "I just asked you if the boys spoke of his reputation as Disappearing Dick?"

This was too much for Ted, and again his mother was forced to intervene.

"Anyway," the boy managed to interject, "if they did say something about it they didn't say he was a spook, like your old Very-scary girl told it."

"Ted Brandon! Nothing about spooks! We never even mentioned them, that I remember. But they said that Mr. Sanders lived somewhere around here but no one knew where, that he went right up the hill to the stone house and never went in the house nor in the barn nor anyplace but just disappeared," rattled off Nancy.

"Why daughter!" protested Mrs. Brandon, "how perfectly absurd. I'm surprised that you should listen to such truck."

"But of course I don't believe it, Mother, it's just funny, that's all," explained Nancy, who had begun to carry the dishes to the kitchen quite as if she just loved to do it.

According to their new schedule, both Ted and Nancy were expected to do their part in the clearing of the table, and washing the dishes, and as this was a beautiful summer evening, the children "fell to" very promptly.

"It's too lovely to stay inside," remarked Nancy. "You'll come out with us, won't you Mother? There's heaps of things you haven't yet had a chance to see around here," she pleaded.

"But we really must get things in order," declared the mother. "You and Ted hurry along with your work—Ted will dry and you wash tonight, Nancy, and meanwhile I'll sort of dig in—"

"Mother! You can't. You have just got to have your evenings free," protested Nancy. "You need lots of fresh air out here—"

"I know, dear, but after all we are just ordinary mortals and we must live as such. That means—civilization, around here," laughed Mrs. Brandon, who was already "digging in."

"I'll put these pans away first." She paused. "Whatever is this? I do declare, children, here are your lost potatoes, packed away in among the empty pans. Now, who could have done that?"

"Ted did," replied Nancy. "He was sorting the tins. But Mother," she said, in a grieved tone, "I know I did waste a lot of time today."

Nancy was carrying out a tray but she had stopped abruptly. No punishment could be greater to her than the loss of a summer evening out of doors, except it was her mother's loss of that self-same evening.

"I'm so sorry," she sighed. "I know I did idle my time today, Mother dear, but I can't bear to have you—pay for it."

"Nonsense, dear, I don't mind. Really the exercise will do me good," insisted Mrs. Brandon. "Just attend to the dishes and you won't know these quarters presently. I'm glad we found the potatoes," she said, but Nancy was now too serious to joke.

A call from the side porch checked their argument. It was Ruth calling to Nancy.

"Come along!" she shrilled through the screen door. "There's going to be a band concert—"

"Oh, I can't, Ruth," Nancy called back. "I must do—"

"You *must* go, dear," interrupted her mother.

At this Ruth came in to wait. Ted was already off—he did not need to be coaxed to give up his task, and when dishes were not being washed surely they could not be dried.

But Nancy felt guilty. In fact the band concert, novelty though it was, with firemen and a baseball team making up the "scrambled" programme, was not loud enough to still the voice of regret.

"I can't bear to think of mother doing, now on this beautiful evening, what I should have done today," she confided to Ruth, as they waited between numbers.

"I'll help you tomorrow," offered Ruth kindly. "And I won't bring Vera. She's rather critical—"

"I'll be up at daybreak," resolved Nancy, really determined now to get the little country home in order.

A band concert in Long Leigh was plainly an important event, and the numbers of persons crowding about the band-stand on the village green attested hearty appreciation for the musical efforts. The firemen, however, seemed to draw out the heaviest applause, but that was because old Jake Jacobs the best piccolo player around, had been training them. Still, there was Pete Van Riper, the drummer on the baseball side of the platform. He certainly could drum, and the small boys around kept calling to him in baseball parlance such encouragements as "Make it a homer, Pete! Hug the mat! Hit her hard!" and such outfield coaching.

Ruth had met a number of her friends and some she introduced to Nancy, but the concert was spoiled for Nancy. She could see and actually feel her mother working in that little country place to which she had come, just to give Ted and Nancy a happy vacation.

When her worry was becoming so keen that she felt she must ask Ruth to go home with her, there pushed into the crowd an old man in a broad-brimmed straw hat, although the sun was well out of all mischief.

"Look!" whispered Ruth. "There's Mr. Townsend! And that's Mr. Sanders—with him!"

Just then the two men stepped over to the little mound where the girls were. They did not see the girls, but Mr. Sanders drew Mr. Townsend to a sudden stop in a space directly in front of Nancy and Ruth.

"I tell you, Sanders," Mr. Townsend said, in a voice not at all suitable for his surroundings, "the whole town is talkin'. They say all kinds of things and you had better out with the whole thing."

Mr. Sanders laughed as if he enjoyed the joke.

"Keep cool, keep cool, friend," he said.

But Mr. Townsend was by no means keeping cool, and he said so, sharply.

"And I've left my home, got my sister on her ear, made a poor man's name for myself—"

Mr. Sanders grasped his arm with a sudden movement, perfectly evident to the astounded girls.

"When you are tired of your bargain, Elmer Townsend," he said, "just let me know."

# CHAPTER VII

## THE SPECIAL SALE

THEY had worked like slaves, according to Nancy, while Ted insisted he was too tired even to eat.

"But it's going to be a grand success," promised Ruth. "I can hardly wait until morning for the doors to open."

"Sale now going on!" chanted Isabel, a friend of Ruth's, who had come in to help. "Ladies and gentlemen! Step this way for your fish lines!" she called out, testing the possibilities of the next day's special sale. "Here's where you get your fish-hooks that never slip, and your tackle that always tacks, and as for sinkers—"

"You'll sink, first shot," Ruth interrupted, from her perch on the stepladder, where she was waving a Japanese lantern as if that filmsy article had anything to do with fishing tackle.

"Oh say! Look here! Who took my best reel?" cried Ted. "I want that for myself. It was in a dollar box—"

"Then it's got to be sold," called back Nancy. She was sitting on the counter counting fish lines, a dozen to each box.

"Sold nothing!" retorted Ted. "I'd like to know why I can't have the best—"

"You can, Teddy dear," Ruth told him. "You have been a perfect lamb to help us all afternoon, and I never did see two legs do more trotting than yours have done since Nancy locked the front doors and put us all to work like prisoners. You may certainly have the reel, and there's a wonderful pole back of the empty cigar boxes—there on that first shelf. See it? It's in a gray case—"

"Ruth Ashley! Whose store is this?" Nancy pretended to be very severe but her jolly little laugh filtered through the words in giggles and titters. "If you are going to give things away, why not start in with the perishables? There's a basket of apples, Ted himself bought out of the general fund, and unless they can be sold as bait, I don't see what we're going to do with them.'' She had counted out all the fish lines and was resting against the old-time candy glass case, now neatly filled with post cards and stationery supplies.

They had had a merry time getting the Whatnot Shop ready for the first special sale, and girl-like, had expended a lot of energy upon pretty effects in the arrangements of articles. Mrs. Brandon ''chipped in'' as Ted expressed it, and Nancy was able to supplement her stock considerably. She had also made a very attractive poster for the big front window, in fact, it was so attractive that Ruth put another sign right alongside of it which stated:

This poster, handmade, for sale
Price $2.00

''We always sell our charity posters,'' she insisted, ''and they are never as pretty as this. Just look at that fish. What is he, Nancy? A cat-fish or a pickerel?"

"I'm totally ignorant of the varieties," replied Nancy grandly. "But I like the flecks on his back so I made him up flecked."

"The fellows will be here awfully early," Ted warned the girls, "so you better be ready to sell, quick as the door's opened."

"We'll be here," sang out Ruth. "And Ted, be sure to tell them this is a strictly cash sale. No charging and no refunds. If you buy a fish pole and find it's a curtain rod you've got to go fishing with the curtain rod. Nancy, here's those fancy little colored bags to fool the poor fish with. Where do you want them put? Some place very safe, for they're easily broken, you know," Ruth cautioned.

"Right here in the show case," Nancy directed. "They're too cute to be stuck away on a shelf. Ted, you better run off and have some fun. I don't want mother to think we've been stunting your growth. You know how particular she is about exercise."

"Exercise!" repeated Isabel. "As if the poor child hasn't been stretching every muscle to its utmost all afternoon. Take my advice, Ted, and lie down. I'll make an ice bag out of an old bathing cap—"

But Ted was not waiting to hear Isabel's kind, if foolish, offer. His merry shout as he rounded the corner, however, spoke decidedly against ice bags as well as couches.

"Let's quit," suggested Nancy. "Honestly girls, I thought housework was tedious, but I can't see much difference. I believe I'll be winding fish lines all night, I've got them tangled in my brain."

"Then you're the one for the ice bags," pronounced Isabel. "I love to make them and I love to put them on pretty heads. Here Ruth, let's put her on the couch. I think she looks a bit feverish."

Kicking and protesting Nancy was forced to get down from "her perch," and stretch out on the little leather couch in a favorite corner of the sun porch. Then, while Ruth literally held her there, Isabel cracked ice, put it in a green rubber bathing cap, that leaked like a sieve, tied it up most imperfectly, and presently clapped it on Nancy's head.

"Oh, please! It's leaking! I'm all wet. Isabel, you're freezing my—my thinker!" yelled Nancy, as she struggled to free herself from her playful companions.

"That's the idea," replied Isabel. "We've got to freeze your thinker to make you forget your fish lines. Here now, dearie," she mocked "lie perfectly still—"

"You're spoiling my pretty new gown," yelled Nancy, referring to the oldest and most faded gown she could find that morning, in preparation for the extra work.

But Isabel held the bag in the general direction of Nancy's forehead, while little icy cold streams tinkled down her neck and into her ears. Ruth served as body guard, and almost kept Nancy on the couch, her feet, arms, and other "loose ends" hanging over untidily.

The store bell was jerked suddenly and violently.

"Oh me, oh my!" groaned Nancy, jumping up so as to smash the ice bag to the floor, cut its string loose and send the remaining chunks of ice flying. "I can't go. Ruth, will you—"

"Love to," chanted Ruth, starting off promptly.

"Look at the puddle," bewailed Isabel, but Nancy interrupted her.

"No one, simply no one can come in today. Do run out, Belle and restrain Ruth. Just listen to her sweetest tones—"

Isabel went. She liked to " 'tend store" and each possible customer represented to her, as well as to Ruth, a possible adventure.

"No, I'm not the proprietor," Nancy heard Ruth saying.

"No, she really can't see you," was Isabel's contribution.

A man's voice, full, rich, persuasive, was speaking in so low a tone that his words did not convey meaning to the listening Nancy.

She listened! She crept nearer, and finally realizing that both Ruth and Isabel were not being able to dismiss the stranger, she attempted to right her rumpled self, to pat the unruly hair into place, and not knowing that her forehead looked like a beefsteak from the ice freeze, she sauntered out into the store.

"This is Miss Brandon," announced Ruth as she entered. "She is the proprietor."

Nancy found herself in the presence of a very important looking young man. His Panama hat was on the counter, his suit case was on the floor, and he stood in the most attentive, courteous attitude, bowing as if she were meeting him in a reception room.

"I've heard of your store, Miss Brandon," he said. "In fact, it's fame has travelled far and wide, and I'm here representing a Boston firm of sporting goods. I would like you to see—"

"Really," faltered Nancy, "this is only

sort of a play store. We are doing it for a vacation experience.''

''Exactly the thing,'' insisted the young man, who was not polite to the point of affectation but simply polite as a gentleman. ''I know this territory pretty well, and you will possibly be surprised at the class of customers who will, doubtless, seek you out. The motor people come along here from Gretna Lake. There's good fishing on that lake, and fishing supplies have a way of giving out suddenly when the inexperienced handle them. If you will let me—'' he was tackling the suit case.

''But you see,'' protested Nancy, much embarrassed, ''I really have no authority to—buy. Mother is not here—''

''You assume no obligation,'' insisted the man. ''As this is your store we are glad, in fact anxious, to leave you a sample line. If you sell them you make a very fair commission, if you do not I pick them up and try something else on my next trip.''

He opened the case, and presently was displaying a bewildering line of such fishing tackle and general sport supplies as Nancy had never dreamed of. Ruth and Isabel were fascinated. They suggested, in spite of their better judgment, that Nancy stock up with the pretty little trout flies, the feathery kind tied to fish hooks. Then Ruth thought they ought to have at least one box of the dry flies, the sort that floats without the hook, and before they knew it the salesman had deposited upon the counter, goods worth so much money, that Nancy could only gasp at the transaction.

"But I haven't any place—"

"This little case, if I may suggest," said the salesman, "is admirably suited. You could move your cards to the far end, couldn't you?"

"Oh, yes," chimed in Ruth, "and Nancy, just see the lovely window card!" She was holding up a big folder that had been neatly packed in, folded in sections, within the suitcase. "Why, it will be wonderful to have such goods, and I'm sure the summer folks from Breakneck Hill will just buy us out as soon as they hear we have such splendid stuff.''

''I think you are right,'' replied the salesman. ''But as you seem doubtful, Miss Brandon, I'll return later and talk with your mother, if you wish.''

Nancy considered quickly. Her mother should not be annoyed with such details; also, the special sale was to be a matter left entirely with the girls and Ted. He was claiming and entitled to a share in certain articles. So she answered:

''I don't think that will be necessary. Mother won't object, I guess, if I don't have to sign anything—''

''Nothing whatever,'' she was assured.

''But how did you find out about us?'' asked Isabel. ''This is such a tiny store and it is on the back road, really.''

''The tiny store on the back road with the quaint name Whatnot Shop is more attractive than a big public place,'' replied the salesman. He had handed Nancy his card and she saw that his name was W. S. Webster. "As a matter of fact, one of our firm was passing here in his car, and he left me the memorandum. But I've heard of the special sale of fishing tackle out on the Long Leigh road from perhaps a half dozen persons."

The girls gasped, simultaneously. They were overwhelmed. If their fame had thus travelled afar, what would the day of the sale bring them?

"Very well," stammered Nancy, trying once again to keep her wet dress out from her neck while she worried over the effect of that besprinkled garment. "I'll be glad to do what I can with the goods, but really, I had no idea of going in for such, such important articles."

"If you will let me say so," remarked Mr. Webster in a gentlemanly way, "I think you girls have the right idea. So many putter around with art stuff these days, that they don't realize the big chances they are missing in business. Some of

America's brainiest women are heads of our wholesale firms, and they make more money than movie queens," he finished pleasantly.

When he was finally gone and the door well bolted this time, the three girls joined hands and danced around like a kindergarten class.

"Me for the movie queen!" sang out Isabel. "You, Nance and Ruthie, can sell fish hooks. Just watch this pose and see if I couldn't pass in a beauty contest—"

There was a racket, a very noisy one, at the side door.

"It's Ted!" exclaimed Nancy, apprehensively.

"And he's got a crowd with him."

"They can't come in," Nancy declared. "We are not going to show goods or take any advance orders."

"Oh me, oh my!" cried Ruth. "No wonder the fine looking drummer said that the brainiest girls in America were in business."

"He didn't," contradicted Nancy. "He said women."

"Very well, Nancy. Just you wait. Go sit down on a big stump in the woods and wait. By and by you'll be a woman."

Then, in spite of all their eloquence, in marched Ted heading a parade of the "fellers." And what could Nancy do but show them the arrangements.

# CHAPTER VIII

## FISH HOOKS AND FLOATERS

"MOTHER! Are you awake?"

"Yes, dear."

"There's someone knocking—"

"I'm getting up."

The knocking continued.

"Hey there, Nan!" called out Ted. "Get up and answer that noise. See what your old sale did! Wake us all up—"

"Ted, hush! Be quiet, Mother's going down—"

"You ought to go. It's your bargain day."

As usual Ted was charging Nancy with delinquency. He wasn't really quarreling, but just talking, as Nancy defined it. Mrs. Brandon had been dressing when the early knock first sounded, so that she was able to get down stairs almost directly afterward.

A dread, a sort of feeling that something might happen in regard to that expensive outlay of goods left by the travelling salesman, seized Nancy. She crept to the top of the stairs to listen, but all she could hear was a man's voice; his words were lost behind the closed doors.

She ventured down to the second landing. Her mother was chatting pleasantly with whoever the early visitor might be, and at the sound Nancy's spirits rose.

"He's no collector," she decided, turning quickly back to her room and starting at once to dress. She must be ready early. All signs pointed to an early patronage, and although Ted had declared he would be up at daybreak, it was all right, Nancy concluded, for him to sleep until seven o'clock.

Her mother was calling in a subdued voice.

"Nancy, I'll get breakfast now, as I hear you stirring," she said. "I want to leave things ready for your lunch today, so I came down early."

"All right, Mother," Nancy replied over

the balustrade. “I’ll be down soon. Who called?”

“Is Ted awake?” Mrs. Brandon was still restraining her voice.

“He was, but he isn’t,” half whispered Nancy. “Wait, I’ll run down and help, then come up and dress later—”

Curiosity was too much for Nancy’s patience, so she merely tucked her hair tidily into a cap, and in slippers and robe joined her mother who was preparing breakfast.

“Who was it?” she asked breathlessly.

“Why, your famous Mr. Sanders,” replied Mrs. Brandon, indifferently. “He wanted a little model of some sort, a windmill, it looked like. I happened to spy it—”

“The funny little windmill!” Nancy exclaimed. “Why, we were wondering what that was. Did he say it was a model?”

“Not exactly, but I judged it was. At any rate, dear, you mustn’t always be looking for mystery in Mr. Sanders’ doings. I would call him a very pleasant gentleman.

Here, dear, stir this cereal. I want you and Ted to make sure you get enough proper food.''

Nancy stirred the meal, which was receiving a preliminary start before being put over the hot water in the double-cooker.

''But you see, Mum,'' she remarked very quietly, ''he is queer. Whatever could he want a thing like that for? And why did he come for it so early?'' Nancy asked.

''He wanted it because it has something to do with his line, is the way he expressed it, and he came early because he has been away and just heard of your sale. If he waited later, he explained, the little windmill might have been swept away in the tumult,'' Mrs. Brandon replied. This seemed to satisfy Nancy's inquiries, but secretly Mrs. Brandon herself was just a little puzzled about Mr. Sanders. For instance, it had been very clear to her that he just laughed off, rather than explained, the purpose of the possible model. Something ''in his line,'' which he had forgotten to take away when the Townsends moved, seemed vague, to say the least.

Nancy was now eating her breakfast with her mother. She confessed to having waked more than once during the night, in anticipation of the big day.

"And I'm going to send you a little surprise treat for lunch," her mother confided. "I want you and the girls to enjoy yourselves in spite of your self-imposed business tasks, so I'm sending out some—ice cream!"

"Oh, Mumsey—love!" exclaimed Nancy, jumping up and in giving her mother a bear hug almost spilling the last spoonful of grape fruit. "Aren't you too ducky! We'll have a regular party, and I'll ask—How many have you ordered for?" she demanded abruptly.

"Two quart bricks. That's counted twelve servings," replied her mother. "Of course, one brick is for Ted, and you must help him a little."

"Of course, Mumsey-love," promised

Nancy. "We'll get every body out and close up shop from one until two, and have a regular party!"

From that time until Nancy was almost, but not quite, ready "for the fray," as she expressed it, she kept herself in a flutter of excitement. Her mother went into town as usual on the seven forty-five trolley, and even then there was a waiting list at the front door of the shop, children peering in the two broad windows which looked out onto the old-fashioned long porch.

"Come on, Ted, hurry-up," begged Nancy as her brother tarried over his breakfast. "The girls won't be here until eight, and you've got to go outside and try to keep those boys quiet. They'll be coming through the window if you don't."

"Oh, that's Buster, making all that racket," declared Ted, getting another look at the paper which he was not supposed to read at the table. "I'll go out and talk to them, in a minute," he promised laconically.

"Please do, then," begged his sister.

"You take it as easy as if we didn't have a big responsibility."

"What responsibility?" he asked, actually deciding to move his plump little self from the table. "I can't see what you're all so excited about."

"Of course you can't. But I'll tell you. Everybody, for miles and miles, knows about this sale, and we've got to get busy." Nancy was peering anxiously out of the side window. "I do hope," she said again, "that the girls will get here soon."

"Is that Very-scary girl coming?" asked Ted. He was trying to set his blouse straight around his sun-burned neck.

"You mean Vera. She's gone away for a while—"

"I hope she stays away," snapped Ted. "I can't seem to like her—"

"I'm sure that's too bad," mocked Nancy. "She would feel dreadfully bad to hear that."

"Oh, don't be funny. Listen! They're hammering on the door. You had better open it or they'll break the glass," cautioned the boy.

"Dear me, Ted," exclaimed the excited Nancy, "I can't go; perhaps you had better open it. Why didn't you fix up a little," she argued, looking critically at the usual vacation boy. "You might at least have put on a white blouse."

"To sell fish hooks?" roared Ted. "That's a grand idea. Why, Nan, the fellows would think I was giving a party—"

The noise at the front of the store was now becoming so insistent that both brother and sister found it imperative to respond.

"Come on," said Nancy, sighing rather miserably. "We may as well face it. But don't let them back of the rope. We can't wait on more than a few at a time."

At that Nancy and Ted entered the store.

"Look—at—them!" gasped Ted.

Faces were pressed against the windows, the door, against every inch of outside space that could command a view of inside the store, and they looked so funny, the flat noses, the white spots on cheeks, the opened mouths, bumping against the glass!

"Hello! Hello!" shouted Ted as Nancy fumbled with the door lock. "What do you think this is? A circus?"

Then, as Nancy opened the door, there was the unavoidable falling in!

"Please!" she begged. But the boys seemed actually massed as for some game.

"Hey there!" urged Ted. "Whoever doesn't behave can't get waited on a-tall!"

But his words had no effect upon the eager urchins.

"I want that rod over there!" shouted Rory Jennings. He was tall, big and noisy.

"That's mine—that beaut in the window," insisted another. Ted called him Shedder, or something that sounded like that.

"Hey, please, missus please," begged a lad so freckled Nancy couldn't see anything else but freckles. "Please missus," he entreated, "couldn't you just hand me over that crab net? That's all I want."

"Hey there! Stop crowdin'," ordered a boy who was using all his strength to make matters worse. "She can't wait on us if you don't give her a chanst."

There were easily twenty-five or thirty youngsters in the crowd, and Nancy felt quite helpless to supply all their wants at once. The fact that goods were offered at the very lowest figure possible, that a twenty-five cent ball of fish line was marked ten cents, of course, accounted for the rush. Many boys could get hold of a dime, but a quarter was not so easy to pick up, it seemed.

Then, too, the advertising, one boy telling the other, had done much to make the sale known; hence the early morning rush.

"Now don't muss everything up!" ordered Ted, for a group of boys had laid hold of the fish-hook box, and it was impossible for Nancy to get it back.

"You must not take things away from the counter," she protested, for at that moment the box of sinkers was being carted off to the door, by Jud Morgan and Than Beach. They said they only wanted to pick out a couple where there was more room, but it was plainly a risky way to make their selection.

"Dear me!" sighed Nancy to Ted. "Please look out and see if the girls are coming. These boys will have everything upset—"

But the girls were coming, in fact they were just then elbowing their way in from the front door.

"Hello—hello—hello!" called out Ruth joyfully. "Isn't this grand! Going to buy us out first thing—"

"Oh, land sakes!" wailed Nancy. "I've been in here fifteen minutes and I haven't sold a stick. We should have charged admission."

Isabel looked on rather importantly. Evidently she knew or thought she knew how to handle a crowd of boys.

"You've got to get in line!" she announced.

A laugh, a whole series of laughs was her answer.

"Do you hear me?" she insisted, raising her voice to suit the occasion.

"Sure, we hear you. Want us to clap?" answered impudent Sammy Larkins.

"Now see here," Ruth attempted to order. "If you boys really want to buy anything you have got to stand back and take turns—"

No sooner had that order been given than everybody made a dash for the first place in line, and the tumult that followed all but drove Nancy under the counter.

"Say, look here! Want us to put you all out?" demanded Ted, in unassumed indignation.

"Try it!" tempted Buster, pretending to roll up sleeves he didn't have.

"But don't you want to see the things?" cried out Ruth in desperation, for those boys were tumbling around the floor and actually fighting, at least they made that kind of noise, it seemed to the girls.

"Su-ure!" came a chorus.

Then Nancy had an inspiration. She got up on the high stool that stood by what used to be Miss Townsend's desk and she immediately commanded attention.

"I'll tell you," she began, "if you all sit down on the floor just where you are, the window sills or any place, I'll tell you about some of the most interesting things we've got here. They are not for sale, but they belonged to a sea captain—"

The magic word had the desired effect. At the word "sea captain" that crowd of boys, dropped "in their traces," and it was then Nancy's duty to unfold to them some wondrous tale.

For boys like a story—when it's about a sea captain even if they are out to buy bargain fishing tackle.

# CHAPTER IX

## THE BIG DAY

As Ted said afterwards: "It was some story!"

Nancy stood there on the stool, dangling an old rusty knife which she had just spied among the box of unclassified articles, and she told those boys a yarn, a regular old salt-yarn, which she frankly admitted was pure fiction.

But how they listened! As Ruth expressed it: "How *hard* they listened!"

No more jostling, nor pushing nor underhand squabbling. Every boy among them wanted to hear all that story, and consequently he was taking no chances on missing any of it.

"And when the old sea captain looked into the poor half-frozen face of that baby he had picked up, lashed to an icy—an icy plank," Nancy trilled, becoming so interested in her subject she almost forgot the make up of it, "then he remembered," she went on, "the big Newfoundland dog, Jack, who had fallen back into the sea exhausted from his long swim."

She stopped. The boys said "Gosh," and "Gee Whiz." Buster said "Jingo!" and there were probably many other subdued and impulsive exclamations of the crisp boyish variety.

One little fellow who was sniffing audibly, piped up a question over Than's shoulder.

"Say miss," he said. "Say Miss—Nancy," he corrected himself, "could a feller buy that there knife?"

"Why," flushed Nancy, "the knife hasn't anything to do with the story—"

"Naw!" came a chorus. " 'Course not!"

"It was a corkin' good story," applauded Nort Duncan, clapping grimy hands.

"But you said the ole captain cut the ropes with a rusty knife—" the little fellow insisted.

"Now look here, boys," called out Ruth

suddenly. “You are all settled down, nice, quiet and orderly. Suppose we begin to see what you want to buy. There are three of us to serve you, and if we divide you up in three groups, I’m sure we can give every single one of you the biggest bargain you ever got in fishing tackle.”

After that, something like order prevailed, for most boys are not devoid of a sense of honor, not by any means, and surely after Nancy’s story they owed her attention and politeness.

Ted helped. He was able to hand out the poles and took pride in doing so. They were, most of them, nice shiny, new bamboo canes, and it didn’t matter how long it took him to please a customer. In one hour, however, he had sold ten at fifty cents, five at seventy-five cents and two at a dollar each. Ted was delighted, and secretly agreed with Nancy that “business was the thing.”

Meanwhile the girls were busy, and happy. Ruth had taken charge of the sinkers and hooks. Isabel was having a fine time with the crab nets and fancy reels, the nickel kind with the stem winders, while Nancy acted as general supervisor and director of the entire stock.

Things were going merrily and few disagreements marred the proceedings (not to count the scooping up of fellows' caps in trying out crab nets, or the occasional protest from someone who would resent being poked with new fish poles), when there appeared at the door a very pleasant looking, in fact a very "good-looking" young girl.

"That's Sanders' girl," said a boy into Nancy's ear. "You know the feller that —disappears," he hurried to explain.

Nancy had neither time nor opportunity to ask questions so she turned to meet the very blue eyes of the young girl in question.

"Don't let me interrupt you," said the stranger. "I can wait," and she stepped aside to let Tom Preston get change from a precious one dollar bill.

Nancy noticed that the young lady had all the known signs of college life. She wore a worsted tam o' shanter (in summer), she also wore a sweater to match, with a tan golf skirt and—heavy stockings, ending in good, strong, walking Oxfords. If these signs were not collegian, thought Nancy, then the girl must be an actress which she obviously was not.

But she had so much personality, that was it, Nancy promptly decided while still counting out change for eager boys. Also, Nancy reasoned, she had such pronounced individuality, that one did not observe separately her brown hair, her blue eyes and her lustrous, fine healthy skin. She just looked perfect, at least to Nancy, who always loved the athletic type.

"Sanders' girl!" Nancy was thinking. She didn't know he had a daughter, but the girl looked like him, especially around her firm, determined mouth.

Ruth left her boys and was now offering to wait on Miss Sanders.

"I'm Sibyl Sanders, you know," she told

Ruth, "and I just dropped in to see if I couldn't pick up something for dad."

"We're having quite a sale," replied Ruth pleasantly. "When things thin out a little I should like to introduce you to Nancy Brandon. This is her idea of a vacation," Ruth added quizzically.

"Isn't it splendid?" replied Sibyl, brightening with enthusiasm. "I just ran up to Long Leigh to see dad. He insists upon spending a lot of time up here," she continued, "and I feel I must look after him a little. I wonder if you have any pieces of wire or light springs, around? He has use for that sort of material."

"Wire, springs!" Nancy heard the request and a joke, that the disappearing man might slide away on wires and springs, flashed humorously through her mind. But again she found no chance even to whisper the joke to Isabel, for there were still boys demanding change.

In the course of an hour, however, the

youngsters were all "cleared out." Their wants had been supplied, and the girls, with Sibyl, were chatting away about the first results of the sale.

"If they don't go trying things out and then want us to change them," worried Nancy. "I told them positively we would exchange just absolutely not—a—thing," she declared, most emphatically.

"Let's see how much we took in," suggested Isabel. "I had no idea that a lot of small money could be so fascinating."

"Indeed it is," Sibyl rejoined. "I've had experience at college sales, and it always seemed to me the peanut money was the most interesting to handle.'2

This brought on some talk of her college, for just as Nancy had guessed, she was a college girl. Finally, when the receipts were all counted and it was found that the boys, they who came in the first squad, had actually bought seventeen dollars worth of goods.

"It doesn't seem possible!" Ruth exclaimed, "and just look at the bushels of pennies!"

"And we had better prepare for the next arrivals," suggested Isabel. "The lake folks will be along presently on their morning drives."

"And the early golfers returning from the links," added Ruth. "Guess we better tidy things up a little. Those boys certainly can upset a place."

Isabel had found a roll of picture wire and three small screen door springs. These Sibyl bought without giving the slightest hint of the possible use her father was apt to put them to. Neither Isabel nor Ruth, however, paid as much attention to the odd purchase as did Nancy.

"I do wonder," Nancy remarked as Isabel tied up the goods for Sibyl, "what has become of Miss Townsend?"

"Oh, haven't you heard?" exclaimed Sibyl. "She's been quite ill."

"No, I hadn't," said Nancy, considerately. "I'm so sorry. What has been the trouble?"

"Worry, chiefly, I guess," and a sort of sigh seemed to accompany Sibyl's words. "It was too bad she had such a dispute with her brother," she continued, "and yet, they really didn't seem to dispute, just to disagree, but they have both such old-fashioned, gentle natures that they consider it disgraceful to dissent from the views of loved ones. Oh, well!" this time the sigh was unmistakable, "I suppose even the most gentle can hardly expect to go through life without differences. I only hope they do not hold my daddy in any way responsible," she said seriously.

"Why, how could they?" faltered Nancy, in honest bewilderment.

"Oh, of course they couldn't," replied Sibyl hastily, as if regretting her remark. "But you see, daddy and the old gentleman have been such close friends that Miss Townsend might fancy daddy influenced her brother. But I must be running along" she added a little hurriedly. "I'm so glad to have met you, Nancy, and I hope your sale will be a tremendous success."

"It surely will be," chimed in Ruth, while Isabel and Nancy joined in the good-byes.

"Hasn't she wonderful eyes!" was Nancy's first remark following Sibyl's departure.

"I got the surprise of my life," declared Ruth, "when I saw Sibyl Sanders saunter in. There, that sounds like a new song, doesn't it? But you know, girls, she is almost as mysterious as her dad, the way she comes and goes—"

"But doesn't anyone up and ask them where they live?" asked Nancy in evident astonishment.

"Never get a chance," chimed in Isabel. "If we were to go out now and follow her up the hill, I'll venture to say we would get a good sample of the disappearing stunt—"

"But we haven't time, dears," chirped Nancy. "Look! Here come three autos.

Now, ladies, step lively,'' and the way they stepped was lively enough to be called trotting.

''Yes, sure enough,'' Ruth agreed, ''they *are* coming here, and they're here!''

# CHAPTER X

## STILL THEY CAME

Before the girls could pull their faces straight a young man dashed up the steps and was in the store.

"Well, this is great!" he declared heartily. "I see by your window card you carry Mackinaw's goods and I haven't been able to get them nearer than the city." He was addressing all three who stood together back of the counter like a trio in a comedy. The young man looked critically at the show goods in the show counter—the supply left by the travelling salesman.

"Here they are, sure enough!" he exclaimed. "Just give me a half dozen of those plugs, and of those dry flies, and a dozen of those bobbers—"

Nancy set out the boxes and the customer helped himself. He knew exactly what he wanted, and the girls marvelled at his quick selection of the fancy colored artificial minnows, the little feather flies, used to decoy the poor fish, and the bobbers, of which article Nancy had as pretty a selection as might have been in a really large shop.

"You don't know what an accommodation this is," went on the young man, putting down a twenty dollar bill to pay for his purchases. "No, don't bother to put paper on the boxes," he objected, as all three attempted to wrap the goods. "I'll put them right in the car. You see, I'm at the fishing club over on the lake, and when we want supplies there we *want* them instantly," he concluded.

And he was gone before the surprised clerks had time to realize that the sale had almost cleared out all the fancy tackle, and there were coming in at the door two elderly gentlemen, who looked exactly as if they would want fancy flies.

One of the gentlemen poked his head in

the door so comically, the girls all giggled.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "So it *is* a shop. Thought it might be a Sunday School fair and I'd get roped in," he chuckled, stepping inside cautiously. "Sorry, but I didn't come to buy. Can you direct me to Professor Sanders' office?" he asked, while politely removing his hat.

"His office? Why, he hasn't any office that I know of," faltered Nancy, surprised at the question.

"He has messages sent to the ticket office at the station," volunteered Ruth.

"Oh, I see," replied the man, seeming to "see" more than the girls did. "Then, we'll go over to the station—"

So saying the man backed out of the door smiling pleasantly as he departed.

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Nancy. "Our Disappearing Dick is going to have callers. I wonder if he'll perform for them?"

"Those are important looking men," Isabel commented. "Did you see their car?"

"Wasn't it fancy?" agreed Ruth. "Perhaps Sibyl will get a ride home."

"I don't think you folks can be very good detectives around here," Nancy criticized, "or you would have found out what so many people mean by saying that Mr. Sanders disappears."

"Now, listen," quoth Ruth, in a most confidential tone, "I don't call myself sensational, and in fact, people at Long Leigh generally have the name of minding their own business; but there is something mighty queer about Mr. Sanders." She paused while Nancy waited for further explanation. "He does *not* live in the old gray house, for father's men went through the entire place the other day, he's in real-estate you know," she explained, "and there wasn't a thing to show that the old house had been opened since they inspected it last."

"Couldn't he camp in the barn or somewhere outside the house?" queried Nancy.

"No; the barn was locked up tight as tuppence," insisted Ruth. "But he seems to hang out somewhere on that hill, just the same," she added.

"I know!" exclaimed Nancy. "He goes up in a tree with the wires and springs," and she sprang up and down without either. "Some day I'm going up there and I bet *I'll* solve the mystery," she promised gaily.

"Let us know when you're going, Nan," suggested Ruth. "We wouldn't want to have you swallowed up by—the fairies."

"Say," whispered Isabel, her eyes set in what looked like alarm, "do you know, I saw a little woman come up and down our side steps a half dozen times this morning—"

"Oh!" and Nancy laughed merrily. "That would be little Miss Manners, the dressmaker who lives in the tiny bungalow under our window. You see, Mother wouldn't really let us keep store without some supervision. "She's pretty particular, and declares there is no telling who might pop in—"

"And hold us up for our cash box—!" Ruth added so mirthfully as to suggest a good time in the danger.

"Well, any how," continued Nancy, "Mother insists that Miss Manners look in quite often to see that everything is all right. She's as quiet as a mouse—"

"I should say she is," Isabel confirmed. "In fact, I didn't want to frighten you or I should have told you someone was sneaking in," she added, folding up a tape line as she spoke.

"Oh, Miss Manners is so quaint, as Vera would say," Ruth contributed, "that I think she ought to be a partner, if a silent partner, in the Whatnot Shop."

"Yes," agreed Nancy, "it does seem as if this shop should belong to little old people like Miss Townsend, and I guess that's why Miss Manners is so interested. You see, girls, I'm still a very poor housekeeper, and our maid, Anna, won't be back until fall. After I get tired playing store, I suppose," and she sighed heavily, "I'll be expected to start in playing house."

"But if you run the shop as you have done this morning," Isabel interposed, "don't you suppose your mother will think you're a real genius at business?" she inquired.

"You can't fool my mother on geniuses," replied Nancy, who like her companions was putting away the odds and ends of things that had been scattered in the morning's adventure. "Mother is an expert, and she sort of knows—me." This last was said in a way implying a very doubtful compliment for Nancy. "I've been almost a genius at art, for instance. When I was five years old I could draw a goose with my eyes shut."

"How about it when your eyes were open?" asked Ruth, quizzically.

"It was usually a little fat pig, then," Nancy admitted, amid an outburst of girlish laughter.

"Nancy," interrupted Isabel, "here's the ice cream man."

"Ours," declared Nancy. "Now we'll whistle for Ted and his boys and shut up shop for lunch. Isabel, will you please open the side door? We'll take a tray over to Miss Manners and then sit down and enjoy ourselves."

"Here's Ted and his friends now," announced Ruth. "They seem to know it is ice cream time."

"That will save trouble," Nancy remarked. And presently the big sale was all but forgotten in preparations for the feast of ice cream, with other suitable summer lunch supplies.

Isabel took an attractive tray over to solicitous and attentive Miss Ada Manners, while Nancy and Ruth attempted to satisfy the demands of Ted and his ice cream loving friends. The noon day was much warmer than the morning had indicated, and this coupled with the sale excitement, went far to make the little party a tremendous success, just as Mrs. Brandon had planned it to be.

# CHAPTER XI

## THE FAILURE

THE days were slipping by, and Nancy found herself entangled in a rather confused vacation. True, she had already reaped real benefit from the big sale and from the subsequent days' sales in her shop, but was it really being a vacation?

It must be admitted that Nancy had a tendency to stubborness, but since that peculiarity very often marks the first stages of a strong character, her mother wisely allowed her to continue to try things out for herself. The Whatnot Shop was not proving in any way a disappointment, but it was most certainly giving Nancy work, so that she was not free to come and go with the other girls, in spite of Miss Manners frequent and generous offers to " 'tend store" for her.

A bright spot on her calendar not very far off, was the coming of Mrs. Brandon's vacation. Soon she would be at home, free to do all the precious things a devoted mother plans to do in the little interval of freedom so long looked forward to and so quickly spent.

"When you are home," Nancy would continually plan, "I'm going to do that," referring to any one of a number of things being postponed.

Today it was raining; a sudden summer shower was drenching everything as if rain had never had such a good time before, and a charity sale, in which all the girls were interested, was to be held that afternoon. Everyone, including Nancy, expected to attend, and she with others had promised to donate a cake.

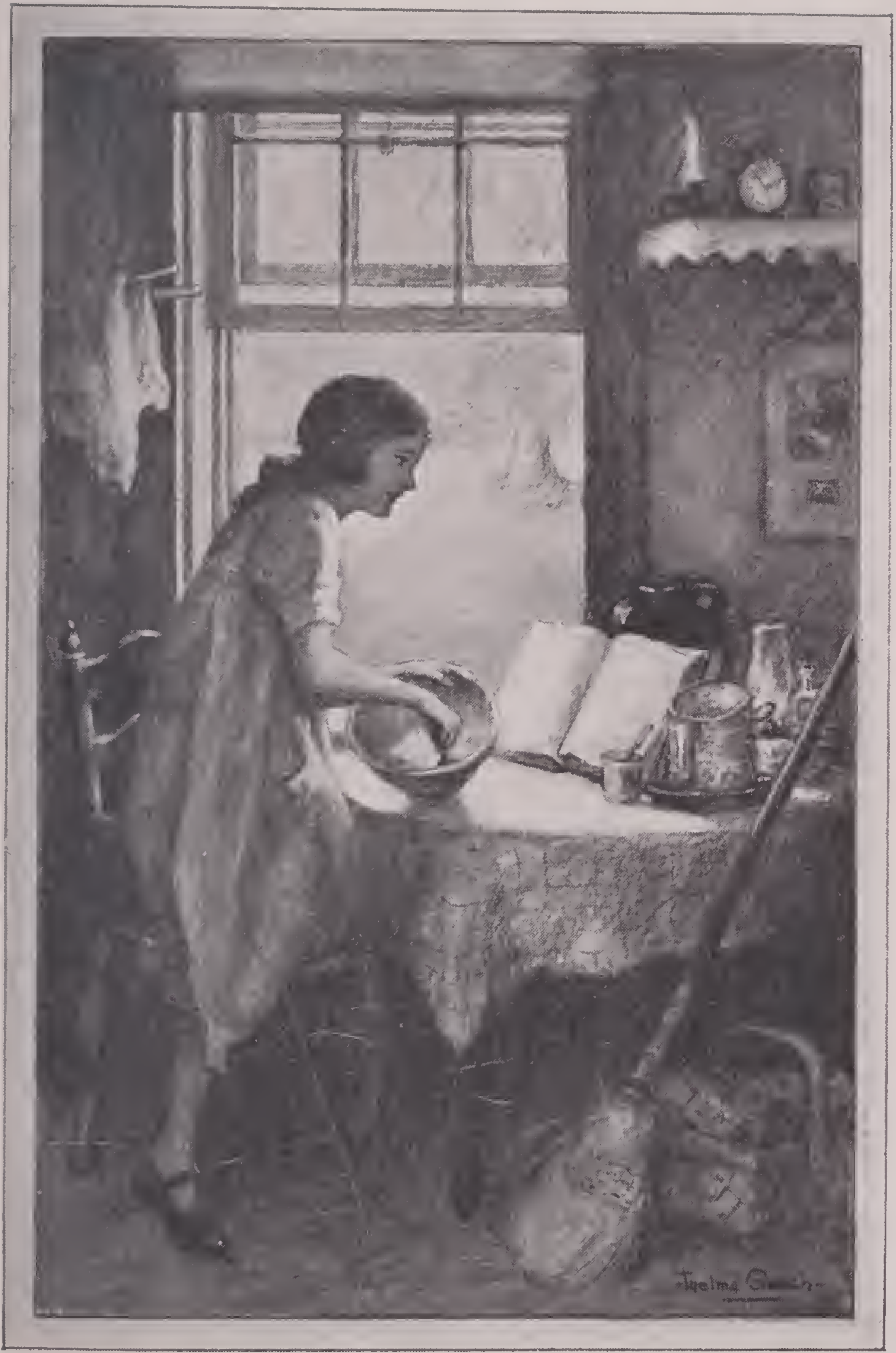
But how it rained! And Nancy had planned to go into town to the fancy bakers to get her cake. Hour after hour she hoped the rain would cease, until it became too late for a telephone delivery, and still Nancy could not go out in the downpour.

"If I could only bake it," she reflected, as she once more gazed gloomily out of the windows at the dripping world. "It's easy enough to bake a cake," she told herself, "and, of course, I could follow the recipe in mother's cook book."

Still Nancy had misgivings concerning such an experiment. A cake for a sale should be good, of that she was certain, and for that very reason she had previously decided to buy one at the French Pastry Shop.

"Well," she sighed, "I may as well try it. It is sure to clear up just when the girls are due to call for me, and I simply couldn't go without a cake."

First locking the store, and making up her mind that no call, however insistent, would tempt her to leave her task, Nancy promptly set about baking her cake. It was no trouble to find the cook book, Mrs. Brandon had found a small shelf suitable for that in the open pantry. Also, the required ingredients were all at hand, and the creaming of the butter and sugar, according to the



Nancy promptly set about baking her cake.

first rule, Nancy executed with something like skill, for she had strong young hands and the spoon in her grasp quickly beat the butter and sugar together in a perfectly smooth paste.

Then she put the flour in the sieve. In doing this she made a slight mistake, for no pan nor plate had been placed under the sieve and consequently a pretty little layer of the sifted flour showered out upon her table before she could get a receptacle under the utensil.

"I had better measure over again," Nancy decided, feeling that the uncertainty of guessing at the lost flour might spoil her cake. So this time she put in her baking powder, salt and flour, and sifted all into a little pudding pan. Separating the eggs, yolks from whites, was not quite so easily accomplished, but even that was finally managed, and now Nancy knew it was time to light the gas oven.

Next, three-fourths of a cup of milk was added to the creamed butter and sugar, the egg yolks added to that and all well beaten. Then the flour was carefully turned in, while beating all together Nancy felt really elated at the prospect in sight.

"I'm sure this will be fine," she was congratulating herself, "perhaps even better than a store cake. And I know how to make the maple icing—I'm glad I have done that much before, at any rate," she admitted ruefully.

The soft yellow mixture did indeed look promising, but now came the time to fold in the whites of the eggs.

"Fold in," repeated Nancy, somewhat puzzled. How shall I fold it in?"

She looked at the batter and she looked at the frothy egg whites. To fold that in would surely mean to spoil all the nice, white, snowy mound of froth. Nancy hated to do it, but she finally spilled it into the bowl full, and started to beat it all over again. The batter seemed rather thin and Nancy decided to add a little more flour. Just here was where her inexperience threatened disaster, but the trial so fascinated the little cook that she did a few other things not proposed by the recipe, but all of which seemed reasonable to her.

The oven was now sizzling hot, and Nancy quickly turned her mixture into two tins, which she neglected to grease, and slipped them into the oven. With a sense of satisfaction she turned to and really cleared up all the utensils—something very commendable indeed in Nancy Brandon. With watching the clock and getting Ted's lunch set out on the little porch table, while she also managed somehow to start her own personal preparations for the afternoon, Nancy was, as she would say, kept on the jump.

But the cake didn't burn, and she took it from the oven on the dot of thirty minutes.

"It will have to cool, I suppose," Nancy guessed, "and while it's cooling I'll make the icing. It looks pretty good but it has got a lot of holes in it," was her rather skeptical criticism, as she inspected the two layers of golden pastry. But the cake, even after a thorough cooling which consumed more time than could be spared, would not leave the tins!

Nancy tried a knife—that broke a great rough corner off. Then she got the pancake turner and slipped it under as well as she could, but alas! The thing actually splashed up in a regular explosion of crumbs!

"Ruined!" groaned Nancy. "I can never fix that!"

Her disappointment was cruel. To see a perfectly good and such a fragrant cake go to pieces when finished, after all the work of getting it that far was nothing short of a tragedy.

Tears blinded Nancy Brandon.

"I might have known," she sighed, "I just couldn't have such good luck with cooking."

The rain was almost over. Ted would soon be in, but Nancy just couldn't help crying. It was so hard not to succeed when she had been counting so especially on that afternoon's fun. Perhaps she could get Ted to go to town for her after all. But upon serious consideration she decided against that plan. She simply wouldn't go now under any circumstances. Her eyes were red and she wanted a good cry even more than the fun of the sale. In fact, she couldn't help crying and she wasn't going to try.

When an hour later the girls called, Ted told them what was strictly true. Nancy was in bed with a sick headache and she couldn't go. Carrying their messages of sympathy upstairs to Nancy, along with a plate full of broken cake and a glass of ice cold lemonade, Ted tried to cheer his disconsolate sister, but even then she had not discovered that the whole trouble was merely her neglect of greasing those cake tins. The cook book didn't direct so simple a thing as that and, of course, poor Nancy just hadn't noticed that her mother did it. She was usually too concerned about the remnants of cake dough being left in the bowl, to observe how the batter was being put in the pans.

"Does it ache hard?" asked Ted, sitting beside his sister and referring to her head.

"Yes, it does, Ted, but this lemonade is splendid."

"I can make good lemonade," Ted admitted. "And your cake is swell, only it sticks awful. I got it out with the pie server," he told Nancy simply.

"Yes. I couldn't get it to come off the pan at all. Well," and Nancy moved to get up, "I suppose I won't feel any worse down stairs. What color dress did Ruth have on?"

To the best of his limited ability Ted described the girls' costumes and then, determined to drive away Nancy's blues, he started in to recite in detail his great experience of that morning.

"Now Nan," he began, "you can say all you like, but Mr. Sanders does disappear. *I saw him!*"

"*You* saw him disappear!"

"Yes, sure as shootin'. We were all running down the hill, trying to get to the station before that big shower, when I said to Tom, 'there's Mr. Sanders, comin' up.' He said he saw him too, and we kept on runnin', when I was just goin' to shout hello, and true as I tell you, Nan, there wasn't any Mr. Sanders anywhere in sight!"

"Ted Brandon!"

"Yep, that's just what I'm telling you. We all saw him go, but no one saw where to."

And presently even the lost pleasure and the spoiled cake were soon forgotten in their discussion of Ted's remarkable story.

# CHAPTER XII

## THE VIRTUE OF RESOLVE

BUT something had happened to Nancy. The cake failure represented to her much more than a simple episode, for it had suddenly summed up all the awful possibilities of untrained hands. It was well enough to make excuses, to claim business and even artistic talent, for Nancy could draw and color, and was among the best in her class as an art student, but the fact now bore down upon her with undisguised horror! She could not do what other girls could do. She could not even bake a cake.

"And just as mother so often told me," she reflected bitterly, "it is not at all a question of preference but of simple, civilized living. What *I* don't do and should do someone else *must* do, and that's anything but fair play on my part," Nancy sadly admitted.

"Aren't you going to open the store, Nan?" Ted asked her. "There's been someone knocking a long time and now they're going away—"

"Oh, never mind," she answered indifferently, "I'm going to get tea ready so mother won't have to bother. She does it like an angel when I plead store business, but I guess, Ted, the old store—"

"Isn't all it's cracked up to be," Ted helped her out rather willingly, for he had not, at any time, shared her enthusiasm in the little business venture.

Nancy sighed dramatically. She was feeling rather sorry for herself and that is always a symptom of wounded pride. It was the same day, in early evening, of the picnic and cake experience, and her crying spell still stirred its little moisture of hurt emotions. Ted couldn't bear to see his sister cry, ever, and he was now all attention and sympathetic interest.

"I wish, Nan, you'd just sell out. The store would make a swell gym, and we scouts need a place just like that—"

"Ted Brandon! Do you think *I* would quit just because a thing is hard! Why, I should think you would remember how hard mother works," she declared, in a sudden outburst of virtue. "And the harder it is the more reason to—to do it," she floundered.

"Oh, yeah, sure," agreed Ted amicably. "Of course that's so. Want me to set table?"

"Thanks, Ted, I wish you would. I'm going to try a cooked custard, I mean a top of the stove custard. If I can cool it by putting the dishes flat on the ice," Nancy reasoned aloud.

"But they'll melt right through, if they're hot," Ted reminded her. "I know my taffy pan did—"

"Well, perhaps I'd better not try it then, as it's so late," Nancy decided, relieved to find a genuine excuse. "Suppose we have toasted crackers with cheese on top? Mother always likes that and *that* can't go wrong."

Fortified with a new determination, Nancy went at her task, and in less time, much less time than she usually required, succeeded in preparing not only an appetizing but a really tempting meal. Ted arranged the crisp lettuce leaves while Nancy cut the tomatoes, which she "nested" in the lettuce, prettily. The toasted cheese-crackers were in the oven and as this was not only a favorite dish with the Brandons, but is also a favorite with many others, it might be well to know how Nancy prepared it.

She buttered saltines, enough to cover the bottom of a flat pan, the pan usually used for "Johnnie Cake," then, on top of the cracker layer, she showered, plentifully thick, grated cheese; another layer of crackers and another shower of cheese. Next, she wet the layers with just enough milk to moisten the crackers. The pan was then allowed to stand long enough for the crackers to absorb the milk, after which the preparation was baked in a quick oven. A delicious brown cheese-cake was the result, and it "didn't go wrong."

"I'm glad I can do that much, at any rate," Nancy half-complained, half-praised. "And Ted, you have made the table look lovely. I shall be so sorry when the roses are gone—"

"Say Sis," broke in Ted abruptly, "you know I was telling you about how Mr. Sanders disappeared."

"Were you?" Nancy was polishing her water glasses.

"Sure, I was. When you had the headache and was crying. Don't you know?"

"Oh, yes, I do remember," admitted Nancy. "But it's too foolish, Ted—"

"Foolish nothing! I tell you I saw him go," Ted declared in a voice that admitted of no argument.

"How funny!" cried Nancy. "Do *you*

really believe in that stuff, Ted?" she asked quizzically.

"Oh, say!" Ted was too disgusted to attempt explanation. That any one should doubt *his* eyes was beyond his understanding.

"Well, I'll tell you," Nancy condescended. "I'm going to call on Miss Townsend soon, that is, mother and I are, because Miss Townsend has been sick, you know," she elucidated. "Then, I'm just going to ask her straight all about that weird story."

"As if she'd tell," scoffed the boy. "Why, her own dog never left her house since she's been sick, if you want to know. What do you make out of that?"

"Cute doggie," replied Nancy, now shutting off the gas stove to await her mother's coming. "And another thing, Ted, I wish you could see how that dog acts around this place."

"I'm just thinking that maybe Miss Townsend is acting sick just to get back here," hazarded Ted. "I hope mother won't give in, if she is, for I like it here, don't you, Nan?"

"Love it! Here's mother! Quick Ted, the ice water. There, let's hide!"

The joy of a thing well done was Nancy's reward for her extra efforts. The little meal was indeed a credit to her, and that it gave her mother unmistakable pleasure was Nancy's greatest satisfaction.

"I am always sure that you can do it, little girl," her mother told her, as they all three turned in to clear away the table things, "but I also know you have to find things out for yourself. How did you manage it all so nicely?"

"Well, I didn't mean to tell you," Nancy sighed, "but I might just as well."

"Better," chimed in Ted mischievously, as he scurried around to do his part in the clearing up ceremony.

"All right," Nancy agreed affably. "I had better tell you, Mother. You see, it was the day of the sale—the church sale the girls were all going to. And I expected to get my cake at the French Bakery."

"And you couldn't on account of the rain," Mrs. Brandon helped the recital along.

"It never stopped for one half hour," Nancy added. "So I tried, that is I just *tried* to *make* a cake."

She drew in her lips and puckered her pretty face into a wry misgiving expression. Nancy was looking very pretty in her rose colored linen dress (the one her mother had finished off with peasant embroidery), and her dark eyes were agleam now with enthusiasm and interest.

Frankly she told her mother the story of her spoiled cake, and how they all three laughed when the mother explained why it had failed—just because Nancy didn't know enough to grease the tins!

Ted, all this time, was casting suspicious glances first at Nancy then at his mother. He seemed to be enjoying a secret that even his glances were not imparting to the others.

"You may run along, Ted," his mother told him, as she always excused him just a little earlier than she and Nancy were prepared to finish. "I guess you can call your part complete. Here dear, I'll put the sweeper away. You run, I hear some code whistling at the side window."

"All right, Mother, but I can chase the sweeper in the pantry as I go," Ted offered. "But I wanted to tell you." He sidled up to his mother very confidentially, "I think Nancy's good and sick of the store."

"Why Ted!" His mother showed complete surprise at the frank declaration. Nancy was not within hearing so Ted ventured further.

"Yep," he continued. "I'll bet she chucks it up pretty soon, and if she does, Mother, could we fellers have it?" he pleaded.

"You boys have it?"

"Yeah; for a gym. Fine and dandy. We've got a lot of things to exercise with—" Nancy was back from the ice box now so

Ted could say no more. The next moment he darted off to the boys who were calling, his own vociferous answer shrilling the path he made as he rushed out.

Nancy remained silent for some minutes and neither did her mother seem inclined to talk. Mrs. Brandon put the center piece on the table and Nancy straightened the window shades, replaced the fruit dish on the little table near the cool window, and suddenly remembered to wind the clock.

"That's Ted's business, dear," her mother reminded her. "You see, even a boy must get some training in these little household matters. He too lives in a house."

"Oh, yes," agreed Nancy. "And isn't it strange that I always remember his part while I so often forget my own?"

"No, not strange," her mother said gently. "Ted's little schedule is new and novel to you, therefore interesting; yours is old and monotonous to you, therefore irksome." Mrs. Brandon managed to get her arm affectionately over her daughter's shoulder.

"But don't be discouraged, dear. You may make a star housekeeper in the end," she prophesied.

"Oh dear. I'm afraid not, Mother," and Nancy sighed heavily. "It seems to me I get tired of everything. I thought it would be wonderful to earn money," she faltered, "and I suppose because I always liked to play store I thought it would be just as much fun to have a real store. But Mother," and she snuggled against the sympathetic breast, "Mother, I do want to help you—"

"And you have," brightened Mrs. Brandon. "You have no idea what miracles I have worked with your extra dollars, earned in that little store."

"Really, Mother?"

"Yes, indeed. In fact I am thinking of taking a real vacation when my little two weeks come around. I had expected to do some extra work—"

"In your vacation?" exclaimed Nancy. She had squatted her mother down in the arm chair and was herself resting on the side cushion. “Indeed, I should say not,” she scoffed, pouting prettily.

“But if we buy this little summer place, dear, we must do a lot of certain things,” explained her mother vaguely.

“Then I’m not going to get tired of the store,” determined Nancy, suddenly.

“Yet Nannie, we might do very well to rent it,” suggested Mrs. Brandon. “A business place is worth something, you know.”

“Rent it? To whom?”

“I think it would cure Miss Townsend of her imaginary ills, to have a chance to come back—”

“Oh, Mother, somehow I shouldn’t like to have her around,” faltered Nancy. “She’s sweet and quaint and all that,” conceded Nancy, “but she gives one the creeps. She sort of brings ghosts along with her when she comes here. And her dog! Why, he’d bark us all to death if we ever let him in to fight with the chimney place.”

Mrs. Brandon laughed good-naturedly.

"I've felt rather against considering the plan myself," she admitted, "for as you say, dear, we would feel like intruders with Miss Townsend established in the store. Well, we don't have to think about it now, at any rate," she decided. "Come along for a walk. I'm afraid you haven't been out much today and that's one thing that would really worry me, dear. I don't want you to stay indoors to take care of the store," her mother admonished. "We don't pretend to carry real necessities that people might expect to buy from us, and such stock as we do keep can be had at our convenience, as well as at theirs," she finished definitely.

"You are perfectly right, Mother," Nancy answered emphatically. "And that's one thing I don't like about business. Everybody just thinks *we* are their servants, and they even become rude when I tell them I haven't got something they happen to want."

"Oh, yes, I know. But I wouldn't worry about that. It all adds to the value of the lesson, you know. Just be sure you are right, keep a cool head and a steady hand," her mother laughed, "then, let the other folks lose their patience if they are foolish enough to do so. But listen," she paused attentively. "Here comes Miss Manners. And she seems to be in trouble. I'll let her in."

The little lady was indeed in trouble for her face, small and somewhat pinched with threatening years, showed, as she entered the room, the unmistakable signs of weeping.

"Oh dear," she sighed brokenly, as Nancy pulled out the rocker for her, "I don't know why I should come to you folks, for I'm sure," she gulped back her interrupting sobs, "you must have troubles enough of your own. But I just had to talk to somebody—"

"Talk away," replied Nancy's mother cheerily. "You know that is the best way to conquer one's own troubles—to attack them with the troubles of someone else."

"Maybe that's so," replied Miss Manners, brushing back a stray strand of her graying hair, "but I don't just see how that is going to help me," she faltered.

"Tell us yours," urged Nancy, "and then we will be better able to judge." Nancy sat back in her own chair, quite prepared now for a new chapter in the current events of Long Leigh.

## CHAPTER XIII

### BEHIND THE CLOUD

Poor little Miss Manners! Hers had been a brave struggle, and as Nancy and her mother listened to the brokenly told story, they were easily ready to pardon the little lady's show of emotion.

So you were worried about your rent, principally?” Mrs. Brandon prompted her, kindly.

“Yes. You see when I had to give up teaching on account of my health, I naturally turned to sewing,” she explained. “If I had only been a teacher in a public school, instead of a private school, I shouldn't have been left without some means,” she complained, sorrowfully.

Nancy was watching her in silent contemplation. What a “sweet” little woman she was. The type always called little and sometimes referred to as "sweet" because of that indefinable quality usually associated with flowers.

"You should not have worried so," Mrs. Brandon assured her. "You have done a great deal for us—I never could have left the children here alone without feeling sure of your watchful kindness, you know."

"Now Mrs. Brandon," said Miss Manners, in a rather dictatorial tone, "I have done nothing at all for you, and I want to assure you that Nancy and Ted require very —little—watching."

"And I want to say," spoke up Nancy, "that Miss Manners is the very nicest kind of a watch—a watch-woman," she laughed. "We never hear or see her when, perhaps, we are noisy and—and rackety."

"I was afraid," continued Miss Manners, without apparently heeding Nancy's intended compliment, "that you might have been alarmed about the silly stories current around here. I mean, that especially about Mr. Sanders."

"Yes," said Mrs. Brandon encouragingly. "We have heard queer tales of his remarkable powers, but I can't say they have alarmed us, Miss Manners."

"You have too much sense, I'm sure, for that," she conceded. "But when one comes into a strange place and hears such stories, especially, when they have something to do with this little place—"

"What could they have to do with *this* place?" Nancy questioned sharply. "Surely, he doesn't do any disappearing around here."

Both the older folks laughed at that.

"No, not exactly," replied Miss Manners, "but you see, they say he influenced old Mr. Townsend until he spent his own and his sister's money. But for my part," she hurried to add, "I could never believe that Mr. Sanders is anything but a perfectly upright gentleman, and in no way responsible for the sad state of the Townsends' business affairs."

"Then *you* don't believe any of the stories about him, do you?" pressed Nancy. "Even Ted insists he saw him—fade away."

The little woman, who seemed for the moment to have forgotten her troubles, looked from mother to daughter. It was so easy to interpret her thoughts. She was measuring Nancy's courage.

"Oh, you don't need to be afraid of frightening me, Miss Manners," Nancy assured her, "I'm only waiting for a chance to investigate the disappearing story. I've been so sure *I* could solve the mystery, that the girls will soon be calling me a boaster if I don't start out to do something. What do you think, really, Miss Manners?" she pressed further.

"Well, I hate to say so, but I can't deny there is something curious about Mr. Sanders. I have often watched him around this house, when he and Mr. Townsend were such friends, and really," she paused as if the admission were most distasteful to her, "I must say, the way those two men ran around the house—"

"Ran around! Those two old men!" cried Nancy, sitting up very straight in sudden interest.

"Yes, actually. I mean out of doors, of course," Miss Manners explained. But they would first fuss around the outside chimney—you know the mason work runs to the ground on my side of this house, I mean the side next to my bungalow," she emphasized, "and there is an old-fashioned opening there. I suppose they used to take ashes out that way when they used the old grate fires."

"Oh, I know!" cried Nancy excitedly. "That's why Miss Townsend's dog made such a fuss over the fireplace in the store!"

"Yes. They always had Tiny with them and the dog seemed as—crazy as the men," Miss Manners remarked.

"Don't you suppose they were working at something?" Mrs. Brandon suggested, sensibly.

"I did think so, of course; but Miss Townsend seemed to fear all sorts of things;

yet she never would put her fears into sensible words," Miss Manners told them curiously.

"But how could that be connected with the foolish story of Mr. Sanders disappearing trick?" Mrs. Brandon wanted to know.

"You see, it was all so unusual—I mean Mr. Sanders coming in here a stranger, and not living any place that folks could find out. Then, when he came down to Mr. Townsend here, got him all excited over some secret, got him to draw his money from the bank, and finally worked poor Miss Townsend into a state of nervous breakdown, why, naturally the people around suspected almost everything—even to calling him a magician," Miss Manners said, with a timid little smile.

"I couldn't give credence to any of it," replied Mrs. Brandon decidedly. "I have met Mr. Sanders and share your opinion; that he is a perfect gentleman."

"Well, I've talked a long way from my own story haven't I?" Miss Manners sighed again, as she blinked against impelling thoughts. "You see, I have no friends at hand, and when I did so large an order of hand-made handkerchiefs—it took me months to do them—I depended upon that money for the summer. But the lady I made them for was called hurriedly abroad, on account of the sudden illness of her husband, and she never gave a thought to my precious twenty-five dollars," the little lady sighed ruefully.

"She went away and owed you all that money!" Nancy exclaimed. "However could she have forgotten?"

"My dear child, we are all selfish when in trouble I suppose," said Miss Manners charitably. "But I did fully expect to hear from her before this, and my next rent will be due in three days. I just came in to consult with you, not to borrow. I wondered if you knew of anything I could do—"

"Certainly I do," Nancy almost shouted. "You can start a little private school, a class in domestic science right in my—in our store," she exclaimed. "I know at least a half dozen girls who will be glad to take a month's course, and we'll all pay you in advance. They always do in private schools!"

The women both appeared speechless as Nancy rattled on. The idea was plainly fascinating. A domestic science class for the girls who hated housework, as Nancy did! How much better than idling an entire vacation!

"Why, I just wonder—"

"You needn't wonder, Mother," Nancy interrupted, "I tell you, it's just perfectly wonderful, the idea, I mean. I'll learn, I'll learn, I'll learn," she chanted, "and then maybe I'll find out a pleasant way—"

"You are right, daughter," spoke up Mrs. Brandon. "When you learn to do things as they should be done, you will find the work interesting. I have been sorry, Miss Manners, that my home has had to get along without a great deal of my time," she turned to her visitor, "as you know I have had to attend business and leave things to my maid. For, after all,'' she said evenly, ''only a mother can teach a daughter, and I have not been with Nancy long enough—''

''You have too, Mumsey, and it's all my very own fault,'' Nancy confessed. ''You often showed me how to do things, and you always told me I would have to pick things up when I threw them down, but I just didn't care. I didn't think it made any difference.'' Nancy was actually joyous in her confession, showing the positive relief one is apt to experience when the mind is suddenly freed from a heavy weight.

''I really think Nancy's idea is a good one,'' said Mrs. Brandon. ''There is no real reason why you should be tucked away next door to us when we need you in here, and we've got more room than we know what to do with.''

''Oh, joy!'' Nancy was positively dancing now. ''We can have Manny in here with us all the time? May I call you Manny?'' she asked. ''It's the cutest name.''

"That's queer," replied the little lady, a soft color showing through her pale skin. "My girls at Raleigh always called me—Manny—"

Then the plans were unfolded, and such plans as they were!

"I feel like a fairy with a magic wand," declared Nancy. "My little store is just like—a magic carpet or something."

"But I don't want to impose—" Miss Manners began.

"You're a positive blessing," Nancy insisted. "The only trouble is—we can't learn sleuthing in your class and I've just got to find out Mr. Sanders' secret before I'm many days older. I honestly think, Mother, the idea of that foolish story going around without anyone—running it down, as Ted would say, is getting on my nerves."

And every one enjoyed a good laugh at the idea of Nancy Brandon having nerves.

# CHAPTER XIV

## A PLEASANT SURPRISE

It was all very exciting, but Nancy didn't want to think that she was really glad to get rid of her precious Whatnot Shop. Ted openly declared "he told her so," as boys will, but she politely drew his attention to the fact that she had fulfilled her contract, that she had earned money, quite a lot of money, in fact, and in now turning the shop over to Miss Manners she was following her mother's advice.

It was a few days later than that evening when she and her mother offered the use of the shop to the little seamstress, and now they were preparing to call on Miss Townsend.

"Suppose she says *she* wants it back," faltered Nancy, just patting her dark hair back into the desired soft little bumps.

"What would we say, Mother, if she just begged us to let her have it?"

"Why dear, we could let her have a part of it, perhaps. She could come in and sell out what little stock you have, while Miss Manners is getting ready for her class."

"Oh, but," pouted Nancy, "I would just hate to have her do that. If you ever saw the way she snooped around, Mother. And the way that dog acted!" Nancy's manner was very decidedly one of opposition to Miss Townsend and her dog.

"Well, come along, dear," her mother urged, "we must not stay late. I have some notes to write up and I don't want to lose sleep over them."

Whatever else bothered Nancy Brandon, an evening's walk through the country roads of Long Leigh, in a beautiful summer twilight with her arm locked tightly in her mother's, was balm enough to soothe and heal every slightest hurt and anxiety.

"Mother-love," she actually cooed, in the softest little voice she could command, "I just love it tonight, don't you?"

"Perfect," replied the happy mother, pressing lovingly upon the imprisoned arm. "And I am so glad, daughter-love, that you want to give up your business." There was a humorous little twist given to that last word, for Nancy's business was and had been something of a practical joke among the Brandons.

"Let's walk around the old house," suggested Nancy, for they were at a fork in the road and needed to choose a way to Miss Townsend's. "Then, maybe we will discover something about Mr. Sanders' quarters."

But just as they were about to turn into the lane that led past the old stone house, Ted hailed them from the hilltop.

He wanted to know where they were going. He wanted to know if he could go along, and as they managed to make signs that gave at least a negative answer to this last request, they found themselves on the open road, walking directly away from the old stone house.

"We won't be long, Ted," his mother assured him, as he reached them, "and you can, if you want to, go over to Norton Duncan's. We will give you a call as we come back, and then we will all go home together. The side door key is in the regular place though, if you would rather go home—"

"Oh, no I wouldn't. I'll stay out 'til nine, and Nort and I'll practice drill," proclaimed Ted. "We're going to have a regular test drill soon, and he's my partner."

This being a satisfactory arrangement, Ted went to Nort's while Nancy and her mother continued on to the little country hotel, where the Townsends had taken up their abode.

"I do hope," murmured Nancy, "that she won't upset our plans. I just can't see, Mother, why you bother about her at all," she complained.

"The place is ours for this summer to do as we please with it, Nancy," her mother replied, "but just the same, it is a little business courtesy to show to Miss Townsend. We have the option on the place, and I fully intend to buy it, but the shop was so dear to Miss Townsend's heart, that I feel we ought to, at least, tell her what we plan to do for the month."

"You're so, generous, Mother," sighed Nancy. "I wish *I* were more like you."

Her mother smiled and squeezed the young hand that rested so confidently upon her own arm.

"Don't worry, dear," she answered. "You know what dear grandma always said when you got into little troubles?"

"Yes," replied Nancy, "that my heart was in the right place if my head was a little shaky."

"Yes, that's it. And don't we miss grandma? She might just as well come out here with us, but I was afraid of bringing her to the old-fashioned little house. Well, here we are at our hotel," Mrs. Brandon broke off, as they came in sight of the long white building, with its unmistakable hotel piazza.

In the row of rockers on the porch sat a row of men on one side and almost a row of women, or "ladies" on the other. Country folks, with a few city interlopers, composed the patronage of the Waterfall House, it was quite evident.

Nancy and her mother smiled at the faces and half-greeted them, as they passed into the office, and after asking for Miss Townsend's rooms, followed the boy along the red carpeted hall, and up a stairs carpeted with what once had been red. They journeyed on until they reached a little turn in the second hall. Before this their guide halted and pointed out a door that bore the number twenty-seven.

Nancy's heart would have jumped a little apprehensively had it been a less healthy young heart, but as it was, she merely kept very close to her mother until the boy turned on his heel and whistled a returning tune.

"Maybe she's sick in bed," Nancy was thinking, just as the door was opened in response to her mother's knock.

"Why! Mrs. Brandon!" she heard a voice exclaim. "And Nancy!" as Miss Townsend bowed them in. "How glad I am to see you! Do come right in. Here, take this chair, it's so comfortable. Nancy, sit by the window," she was pushing a chair over to the girl, "and you can see the people passing. Well, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you both."

Nancy was so surprised she almost exclaimed aloud. There was the "sick" Miss Townsend fairly beaming, in, what surely looked like, very good health. The little dog was frisking around and Nancy had scarcely seated herself in the chair by the window when he pounced up on her lap, and after "kissing her" several times, finally subsided into a small, brown, woolly ball, cuddled into a little nest formed from the soft folds of Nancy's blue voile skirt.

"I'm so glad to see you are better, Miss Townsend," Mrs. Brandon presently said. "You have been ill, we heard."

"Yes indeed, but I'm better now, really a new woman, you might say," and Miss Townsend now seated herself comfortably on the small green sofa near them. "But it was just worry. Worry is a pretty bad ailment, isn't it?" she asked, smiling a contradiction to anything like worry affecting her just then.

"You are real cozy here," Mrs. Brandon ventured.

"Yes, it's quite pleasant, but I've just come back from a trip to the sea shore. I guess that is what helped me most," conceded Miss Townsend.

Like Nancy, Mrs. Brandon also, was much surprised at Miss Townsend's exuberant spirits. It was perfectly plain that some good fortune had befallen the lady since she had paid that mournful visit to Nancy.

"You see," she began, as if in answer to their unmasked questions, "our business affairs are being all straightened out and Brother Elmer is getting back the money he loaned. Of course I didn't understand, and it is one of those affairs a woman isn't supposed to understand." This was said in that sort of tone that conveys deep and mysterious meaning.

"I'm awfully glad of that," Mrs. Brandon assured the woman in her brand new heliotrope one piece dress. It was quite modish, indeed, and without question, very becoming to Miss Townsend.

"Oh, yes," went on the hostess, "I was so worried for a long time. You see, I really couldn't have faith in a business deal that I was not privileged to know the details of. I have been a business woman all my life," she insisted, "and I'm not afraid to tackle any business deal," at this she dangled her amethyst beads self-consciously. "But Elmer and Mr. Sanders!" Her hands went up protestingly. "They just used every dollar. Well—" she broke off suddenly, "it's all right now, so why should I fuss about it. You didn't come to hear of my troubles, I'm sure."

At this point Mrs. Brandon divulged the real purpose of her visit. Nancy was having a great time with Tiny. He was awake now and evidently eager to show off. He stood up and begged, jumped down and "prayed" and otherwise disported himself most wonderfully. The distraction afforded Nancy a welcome chance to sit aside and take little or no part in the elder's conversation, but she was, as Ted would have said, "all ears to it."

"Why, I think that's a perfectly splendid idea," she heard Miss Townsend say, in reference to the plan of giving the store over to Miss Manners. "And I must say you are very generous, Mrs. Brandon," she complimented. "As a matter of fact, fancy-store business is not what it used to be. More folks now take to the mail order plan, especially in winter. Why, there were months when I didn't see the color of a 'green back' in that place,'' she admitted. ''Yet, I couldn't help loving the old place. I had been in it so long,'' she concluded earnestly.

''I met Mr. Sanders' daughter, Miss Townsend,'' Nancy spoke up, determined to bring up that subject, ''and I think she's a perfectly splendid girl.''

''Isn't she though! But she couldn't help but be smart with such a father.'' This last little speech was indeed a compliment to the absent Mr. Sanders.

''But where does he live?'' demanded Nancy, without any attempt to cloak her question with indifference

''Live? Why, my dear child, he lives here! Just moved in, and I do declare, the man needs some comfort after all he's been through. If Elmer comes in before you go I'll have him bring Mr. Sanders in. We are all the best of friends now,'' declared the incomprehensible little woman on the green velour sofa.

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choose pie. I want my picture 'took' curling the edge of a lemon meringue,'' and she executed a few very 'curly' steps to illustrate.

There was no denying it Nancy was happy on these the first days of her real vacation. It had been splendid, of course, to have twenty-five dollars of her very own to offer to advance Miss Manners, to clear up the rent worry, but the store had not been all fun, she was willing to admit that.

''And do you know, girls,'' Nancy confided, ''we, mother and I, had some doubts about the way Miss Townsend would take the news? Do sit down, Belle,'' she broke off. ''How can I tell a story while you're doing hand-springs?''

''These are flip-flaps,'' insisted Isabel. ''Just watch this one.''

She was leaning with both hands on a long low bench, and the ''flip'' consisted of a violent spring of both feet from the ground. After bringing the feet down again with the unavoidable jerk, she performed the ''flop'' by pivoting around until she sat on the bench and stuck both her feet out straight in front of her.

"It's very pretty," commented Nancy. "But if you want to hear my story you have got to flop. I insist upon a sitting audience."

This demand restored comparative quiet and Nancy continued with her narrative.

"I was telling you about Miss Townsend," she went on. "You just should see that lady. She's all 'set up.' We understood she was a nervous wreck—"

"She was," interrupted Ruth, "but I heard mother say her brother's business affairs are being mysteriously adjusted. Maybe that's why she has become rejuvenated."

"Yes, that's exactly it," snapped Nancy. "And how the great, grand trick worked is one of the stories we have missed. I never saw such a place as Long Leigh for floating stories that no one can explain. Miss Townsend talked all around her good luck, but never touched it. Of course, I couldn't be so rude—"

"Of course *you* couldn't," mocked Isabel.

"Just the same," retorted Nancy, "I did ask right out straight, without hint or apology, where—Mr. Sanders lived."

"And you got snubbed for your pains," flung in Ruth.

"Nothing of the kind, I became informed for my pains," asserted Nancy.

"Land sakes tell us!" pleaded Isabel. "First thing you know I'll hear our car, and miss the—mystery."

"Well," began Nancy, deliberately and provokingly, "I asked her: 'Where does Mr. Sanders live?' And just as I was gulping hard to control my emoting emotions, Miss Townsend shook her necklace like a dinner bell, and said softly—"

Nancy paused. The girls were threatening to throw her over the bench into the flower bed but she seemed about ready to divulge the secret, so presently they desisted.

"Well," she said, "Miss Townsend answered, 'Mr. Sanders lives right here in this hotel. He moved in yesterday and the poor man needed the change after all he's been through.' Now girls," pouted Nancy, "did you ever see anything as mean as that? Just when I'm free to dig up the wild and woolly mystery, our hero goes and rents a room in the Waterfall House," and she affected a pose intended to excite pity, but in reality causing mirth.

"I see it all!" cried Isabel, jumping up on the bench and laying a sprawled hand over the heart location. "All, girls, all." Her voice was droning like a school boy reciting the Charge of the Light Brigade. "What happened was this!"

"This!" interrupted Ruth, pinching Isabel's ankles until she literally fell from her perch.

"Whow!" yelled Isabel. "Can't one elocute without being plucked by cruel hands? I tell you, girls, we have lost a lot of fun in not keeping up with our little brothers."

This was said in a very different and quite serious tone. "If you were to ask Ted, Nancy, very confidentially, what is or was the secret of the hidden treasure place, I'm almost sure he would tell you. He *knows!*" she declared loudly, "and so does my brother Gerard know, but *he* won't tell me."

"Then it is or was a question of hiding a treasure," reflected Nancy. "I'm so sorry it is only that. I perfectly hate treasure mysteries, they're so horribly common. I had in mind some sort of great, grand, spooky, now-you-see-me and now-you-don't trick. That would have been heaps more fun than just the old hidden treasure business. Well, at any rate, *we* seem to have missed it, for Mr. Sanders is really living at the hotel," she wound up finally.

"Is that any reason why we shouldn't find out the secret?" demanded Ruth. "It seems to me we would be better able to do so, now that every one else has suddenly grown rich, and there's no more danger of getting folks into trouble by prying into their business. I just wish Sibyl Sanders would come up again. I fancy she would be just tickled to tell us the whole thing,'' declared Ruth.

''I must trot along,'' Nancy suddenly announced. ''And girls, please don't forget about the first lesson in domestic science, to be held at the residence of—''

A loud and insistent honking of a motor horn interrupted Nancy's flattering announcement, and presently all three girls were scampering down to the roadside to pile into Gerard's Duryea car, for Isabel's brother was taking them for a ride into town, ostensibly to do some important family errands, but really to have one of those unplanned jolly times that go to make up the happy summer time.

''I must be back by five,'' warned Nancy. But her companions only pushed her back further in the over crowded car-seat as they sailed along.

## CHAPTER XVI

### JUST FISHING

Some days later the Whatnot Shop was being dismantled, that is the shelves were being treated to a great clearing off, and the old-fashioned glass cases were being lined with white oilcloth, preparatory to Miss Manners' Domestic Science Class storing their samples of food therein.

Gradually Nancy's sense of honor was coming back into its own, for not only her mother but also her girl friends were constantly reassuring her.

"There's nothing small nor frivolous about changing one's mind for the better," they told her. "In fact," said the mother, "that one is willing to do so, is very often a mark of progress. If we didn't change our minds how could we grow wiser?"

"But I thought I'd just love business," Nancy complained. "I was crazy to keep store and now I'm crazy to start something else."

"Which is perfectly normal and entirely reasonable for any healthy young girl," her mother insisted. "Can you imagine girls being as staid and as old fashioned as their mothers?"

"Moth-thur!" Nancy sort of moaned, "If ever I could be as *new* fashioned as my mother I shouldn't mind how old nor how young I might be. And you are a love not to scold me. I know you are glad to see Manny so happy setting-up her school, and I know you will be better satisfied to have her there, facing the fierce public, than allowing me to do so. Not that I had any trouble with the dear public," Nancy mocked. "And not that Brother Ted wasn't always within a few miles call if I needed him. But, at any rate, Mums, I did make some real money, didn't I?" she cooed, quite birdlike for Nancy.

A clean little, yellow bankbook was offered for evidence by Mrs. Brandon at this question, for being a business woman, she knew the value of personal interest in every part of a business undertaking, and so, early in the experiment, she had brought Nancy into the City Bank and there attended to the formalities of opening her bank account.

"Mother, you keep the book, please," Nancy begged just now, as Mrs. Brandon offered it to her. "I know I ought to be very careful and not forget where I put things, but somehow I do. And I would hate to lose that precious book," she murmured, touching her mother's cheek with her lips as she made the appeal.

"Very well, daughter," Mrs. Brandon conceded, "but you simply must learn to remember, and the way to do that is think of a thing as you do it," she advised.

Nancy was, however, already improving in such matters. Being obliged to find things for herself, instead of calling out to Anna, the maid, as she had been in the habit of doing, was teaching a lesson that words had never been able to convey to her.

It now lacked but three days of the opening of the class, and in these days Nancy and Ted were planning to have a great time fishing, exploring, and hunting. By "hunting" they meant looking for Indian relics along the river bank, for Ted insisted there really were such articles to be found there, if one were only patient enough in the search.

This was the day set for fishing, and Ted was just now coming up to the back door with a tin can slung on a string, and that, in turn, was slung over his shoulder on a pole.

"Got lots of them!" he called out. "Nice fat ones, too. We can catch big fish with such worms as these," and he set down the outfit to display his freshly dug bait.

"Well, I'm not going to put them on the hook," protested Nancy. "I don't mind handling the slippery little things, but I can't murder them. You'll have to bait my hook, Ted, if you want me to go,'' she insisted.

''Oh, all right,'' growled Ted, merely pretending to protest, but really just showing his boyish contempt for such girlish whims. ''I'll put them on for you. But do hurry, Nan,'' he urged. ''This is a dandy morning to fish. Hardly any sun at all.''

Calling good-bye to Miss Manners, who, even, this early, was at work in the store, Nancy was soon ready to start off with her brother on the fishing trip. She was clad in her oldest gingham, and wore her most battered big straw hat, nevertheless she looked quite picturesque, if not really pretty even in this rough attire; for Nancy was ever a striking looking girl.

''Think we ought to take your old express wagon, Ted?'' she asked, jokingly.

''What for?'' demanded the boy in surprise.

''To carry them home in,'' laughed Nancy. But even then Ted didn't see the joke.

Presently they were trudging along the heavily shaded road that wound in and out around Bird's Woods until it would stretch along side Oak's Pond, where the fishing was to be done.

"It's fine to have you come, Nan," remarked the boy, wagging his bare head and slapping his fish bag against his bare legs. Ted was wearing old clothes himself, and his trousers had not been trimmed any too evenly, for one leg ended above the knee and the other leg ended below the other knee. But he looked about right as a fisher-boy, his cheeks well tanned, his brown eyes sparkling and his browner hair doing pretty much as it pleased all over his head.

"I'm mighty glad to come, Ted," Nancy was saying in reply to his gentle little compliment. "It is great to be off all by ourselves, although, of course, I have good enough times with the girls," she amended, loyally.

"Me too," added Ted, "I have lots of

sport with the fellows but this is better,"
he concluded, as Ted would.

Arrived at a spot where the pond dug into a soft green bank, rounding into a beautiful semi-circular basin, brother and sister there camped. Ted insisted that Nancy take the choicest seat, a smooth spot on the big tree that must have been felled years before, and which had found comfortable quarters on the edge of the jolly little stream. Sympathetic ferns stretched their soft green fronds along the sides of the naked wood, as if they wanted to supply the fallen tree with some of the verdure of which it had been cruelly bereft, and even a gay, flowering swamp lily, that wonderful flaming flower that holds its chalice above all other wood blooms, bent just a little toward the one branch of that tree that still clung to the parent trunk.

Nancy squatted down expectantly. Ted had baited her hook and she was now casting out her line in the smooth, mysterious stream, clear enough on the surface, but darker than night beneath. She had removed her "sneaks" and stockings, so that she might enjoy the freedom of dipping her toes into the little ripples that played around the log.

"I don't care whether I catch anything or not," she remarked, "it's lovely just to sit here and fish."

"We'll catch, all right," Ted assured her. "This is a great place for fish—regular nest of them in under these rocks." He shifted a little on his perch, which was on a live tree that leaned out of the stream.

Presently Nancy developed a song from the tune she had been humming:

"Singing eyly-eely-ho! Eyly-eely-ho!"

"Got to keep quiet when you fish," Ted interrupted her.

"All right," agreed Nancy affably. "But that tune has been simmering all day and I just had to let it light up. Say Ted," she began all over again, "did you hear about your friend, Mr. Sanders, getting rich?"

"Rich? I'm glad of it. He's all right," the boy declared, flipping his line to a new spot.

"Yep-py, rich," Nancy repeated. "He's living at the hotel."

"Oh, I knew that," scoffed the boy, airily.

"Did you? Then why didn't you tell me?"

"Secret," snapped Ted, shutting his lips with a snap that even a venturesome fish might have heard.

"And the Townsends—they are quite prosperous too," Nancy pressed further.

"Ye-ah." Ted was not encouraging the confidence.

For a few moments neither of them spoke again. Then Nancy's line began to draw, to pull out into a straight line.

"Easy!" whispered Ted. "You've got a bite! Don't yank it. Wait until he's on, good and tight!"

They waited, breathless. Then Ted, the experienced, gave the signal, and Nancy, the amateur, drew very gently on her pole.

Up, up, but still under water, until suddenly the water surface freed the capture, and something black, shiny, snaky, dangled violently from the upheld line!

"Oh, Ted, quick! It's a snake! Look a snake!" cried Nancy, getting to her feet finally, after slipping several times on the smooth log.

"Look out," yelled Ted, for the black slimy thing dangling on Nancy's line seemed to be making directly for her face, as it swung back and forth and darted violently toward the shore.

"Oh-h-h-h-h!" Nancy screamed. "He's going for—" But she was taking no further chances, instead, she flung her pole, line and hook and catch, as far from her as a single fling could send it. The pole floated contentedly but the slimy thing was again hidden in its beloved waters, although it must have still been impaled upon the tortuous hook.

Ted looked a moment at the lost outfit.

"Nancy," he said gloomily. "You're

crazy. That was a fine, fat eel, and they're hard to catch that way. And look at—your—pole."

"I'll get it," decided the surprised girl, instantly slipping down from the log and leaning out over the stream.

"Don't!" yelled Ted. But the warning was given too late, for as Nancy stepped on what seemed to be grass, she found herself thrust into the water, deep enough to frighten her of something worse than a snake.

"Oh!" she yelled again. "I've got to swim out, I'll smother in the bog if—I—don't." And so saying she flung her body free from the deep marsh-grass, and struck out in an emergency stroke toward the open stream.

"Go up to the cove!" Ted yelled. "Just around that pine tree! I'll meet you there!"

The light clothing she wore was not much more cumbersome than some bathing suits are often found to be, so that Nancy, a capable swimmer, was now pulling surely toward the cove, while Ted was racing, as best he could in the heavy undergrowth to meet her as she would land.

But just as Nancy turned in to a clear little corner to make her landing, she heard a muffled call.

"Help! Help!" came the indistinct cry.

Ted was abreast of her and he too heard the call.

"It's over in the sand dunes," he yelled, as Nancy stepped ashore and shook some of the heavy water from her clothing. "Quick, Nancy, the fellows went to play Indian there!"

# CHAPTER XVII

## THE CAVE-IN

There was no time to think of wet garments as Nancy raced after Ted toward the sand dunes.

"Quick," he urged. "They're the little fellows, Billy and Jack, and they must be under the sand."

Just beyond the trees and undergrowth that surrounds Oak's Pond, a stretch of sand hills offered the youngsters an ideal playground. A few scrubby pines managed to draw from the dry soil enough vitality for a very much impoverished growth, and it was from the direction of the trees that the feeble call was now heard, at protracted intervals.

"There!" pointed out Ted. "There's the shack. They must be in a cave-in near it."

His surmise proved correct, for quickly

as brother and sister could reach the spot, they found every evidence of a cave-in and a sand deluge.

"We're here," Ted called. "That you Billy?"

"Oh, yeah," came a pitiful little squeak. "We're smoth-rin' to death. Quick—please—quick."

"There's a board," Ted ordered, at once taking charge of the rescue. "You can dig with that, Nan. I'll dig with my hands."

Exactly like a very eager dog that digs with all fours when he wants to get in or out of a pit, Ted went to work. The light sand flew in clouds as he pawed and kicked, so that compared with his efforts Nancy's board-shovelling seemed provokingly slow.

"Oh, this is no good!" she finally burst out. "I can do that, too," and without a thought but for the rescue, Nancy dropped to the position Ted was working in, and was soon digging and kicking until her clouds of sand rivalled his.

"Oh! Oh!" came repeated calls and

groans. "We—can't—breathe. Move the board! It's pressing—"

"We're coming. We're coming," Nancy called back. "Don't get frightened; you can't smother now."

But it was not easy to reach the imprisoned youngsters, for a collapsed sand hill is as slippery to control as a rushing water fall. Every time the rescuers thought themselves within reach of a board, an avalanche of sand would tumble upon it and bury the end they tried to grasp.

At last Nancy grabbed hold of a big stick that protruded from the hill.

"Here Ted," she called. "Get this! It's under a board—"

Raising the stick carefully they did, at last, lay hold of one of the collapsed boards, the "roof" under which the youngsters had been caught.

"Care-ful," warned Ted. "Raise it! Don't pull it out!"

It was heavy, for sand pressed itself into great weight, in spite of its infinitesimal atoms. At last the rescuers were able, with care and skill, to raise the board, then another, until finally the bare feet of two small badly frightened boys, led directly to the entire persons of the same little victims.

"Oh my! Mercy me!" gasped Nancy. "They do look awful, Ted! Quick let's get them water!"

"Jack is the worst," replied her brother. "Nan, see if your skirt is wet yet. You could squeeze a little water on his face—"

The garment that had been dripping a few minutes before was still damp enough to permit of being "squeezed," and standing over the pale face of little Jack Baker, Nancy managed to extract some drops at least, to coax back life into the almost unconscious boy.

Billy dragged himself out, although he was barely able to do so, and as quickly as little Jack showed signs of life, Ted and Nancy between them carried him down to the water's edge.

They were just about to bathe his face

and hands when a canoe drifted into sight around the cove.

"Mr. Sanders!" called Ted. "There's Mr. Sanders," he repeated, and his voice was reaching the occupant of the canoe, for the bark was now headed directly for land.

First aid and other common sense treatment was soon being administered to both Billy and Jack by Mr. Sanders, Ted and Nancy, and when the cave-in victims were finally entirely resuscitated, it was decided that Mr. Sanders should carry them up stream in his boat, and so enable them to easily reach their homes, at the head of the pond.

"You've been having some experience this morning," the man remarked to Nancy as he waited for the boys to climb in the big long boat. "Can't I give you and Ted a lift too? There's room enough if everybody obeys canoe rules," he said pleasantly.

"Oh, that would be fine," Ted replied, while Nancy was thinking of what to say.

"Sis fell in the pond after her fishing tackle," Ted added. "That was our first adventure."

"That must be what I picked up," interrupted Mr. Sanders pointing out Nancy's pole with the cord wound around it, lying in the bottom of the boat.

"Yes, that's mine," admitted Nancy, "and I'm glad to get it back for it was a special pole—one I got for a premium from a Boston store," she explained.

"Well, pile in," ordered Mr. Sanders, "and you little 'uns' had best not frighten your folks with the cave-in story," he warned. "Better to be careful next time," he finished laughingly.

When all were securely ensconced in the long, graceful bark, Nancy was given the extra paddle and allowed to ply it alongside Mr. Sanders. In the joy of that unusual privilege, (for she was seldom allowed in a canoe,) the accidents were quickly lost thought of, even Jack and Billy venturing to trail their fingers in the stream, while Ted sitting in the stern took chances on throwing out his line now and then just for the fun of feeling it pull through the quiet waters.

As they sailed along, conversation was rather scattered, consisting mainly of snatches of questions and answers between Nancy and Mr. Sanders. The two little boys had scarcely spoken since their rescue, and now within sight of home, they were just beginning to assume normal courage.

Suddenly Nancy started to titter. There was no apparent cause for her change of mood, but the more she bit her lip, looked out toward shore, bent her head toward her paddle and otherwise strove to divert herself, the more the titter gathered and broke into a laugh, over her helpless features.

"Funny, isn't it?" remarked Mr. Sanders drolly.

"Silly, but I just can't help laughing," she admitted. "It's at the idea—"

"I wonder if I couldn't guess," interrupted the man with the strong brown arms. "It's about me, isn't it?"

"Yes," admitted Nancy, slowly.

"And about—about my supposed magic powers." He stopped and enjoyed a light laugh himself. "Wouldn't it be tragic if I should disappear just now?" he said so suddenly, that Nancy jerked her paddle out of of the water and stared at him with a sort of guilty flush.

"The idea—" she faltered.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the big man swinging toward the shore where Jack and Billy were to land. "That's a great story, isn't it? But I'll tell you," he lowered his voice in a tone of confidence, "I am altogether to blame for that fantastic yarn, but sometimes we have to let folks guess even if they do make—spooks out of us." He laughed again and even the little boys were now being tempted to join in. "But I want to promise you and your brother this, Nancy," he said seriously. "You shall be among the first to know the answer to the riddle of my

—magic disappearance around the gray stone house.''

''Thank you,'' Nancy managed to say, as Ted caught a strong little branch on shore, and helped land the canoe.

# CHAPTER XVIII

## INTRODUCING NERO

It did not seem possible that Manny's school had been successfully opened two weeks ago! That the girls in her class, at first numbering eight now counted fourteen, each paying five dollars for the month's training in domestic science, with lessons three mornings a week. Fourteen pupils at five dollars each and every single one paid in advance, while Nancy was acting as class president and Ruth as class secretary; these were, indeed, auspicious arrangements.

And besides the seventy dollars paid Miss Manners for tuition, the class members brought their own supplies and were privileged to take them home with them, in the form of various tempting dishes, "the like of which" as Nancy expressed it, "never had been seen in Long Leigh before nor since."

"Maybe you don't know you're a wonder," Ruth remarked very casually to Nancy, while she, as secretary, was consulting with Nancy as president. "I can cook better *now* than I ever expected to in my whole life. And as for Isabel! She's so enthusiastic, her mother says she has to restrain her from going into the boarding house business. You should just taste Belle's 'Cherry Moss.' Um-m-m! It was de-lic-ious!" and Ruth smacked her lips to the echo. "Her brother Tom wanted to know why we didn't make up a class for boys. He was in the army, you know, and so thinks himself very efficiently trained."

"Isn't it great?" Nancy remarked, referring, of course, to the success of the class. "And for a laggard, an idler and one who positively hated the very letters that spelled cooking, I think I'm doing pretty well myself. I made a fudge cake yesterday and mother carried it out to set before the library ladies, can you imagine that? A cake that *I* made! After my heartbreaking experience with the ungreased pans!"

It was very early in the afternoon and Ruth, with Nancy, was putting the class room in order. She had remained over to lunch as she often did, and the two chums found pleasure in arranging the white covered tables, the shining pans, the numbered spoons and other utensils. It was all so much pleasanter than doing anything in an ordinary kitchen.

The gas range, that was sent in to Miss Manners as a demonstrator's sample, was majestically white and really quite attractive, if such an article can be called attractive, and just now Nancy hovered rather lovingly over it, polishing with the very softest, whitest cloth the impeccable, enamelled surface.

Ruth had been finishing a little memorandum in her oilcloth covered book. She laid the book down now and strolled over to Nancy. In their white aprons and white caps, Nancy and Ruth looked too picturesque to be passed by without compliment.

Ruth wound her arm around Nancy's shoulder. "I wonder," she said, "why we sometimes think that all play is more fun?"

"I never did," replied Nancy, innocently. "My trouble always has been in finding enough different things to do." She looked rather pathetically into the soft gray eyes that were caressing her own darker orbs. There was no impulsive hugging, nor other ordinary demonstrations of affections dear to the average emotional girls, for Nancy was not given to extremes, nor was Ruth addicted to such flagrant sentiment.

The two girls were especially happy just now. Nancy was accomplishing more, much more, than she had ever hoped to do, with her little shop that first brought real financial help to her mother, and was now doing as much for Miss Manners. Besides all this, it was giving the girls themselves a very useful, as well as enjoyable, summer diversion. Ruth, although a new friend of

Nancy's, had become a very fond friend indeed, for the frank, original and genuine qualities of Nancy were unmistakable in their sincerity, and it was easy enough for any girl to love her—if she could but get near enough to her to know her.

"And you don't think it shows a weakness to be so changeable?" Nancy asked Ruth. "I just can't seem to be happy unless I'm planning something new."

"Why, that's—that's a sign of originality," replied Ruth, smoothing Nancy's cap on her dark hair. "Some day you'll do something wonderful—"

"About the girls," Nancy interrupted. "Don't you think we were fortunate to get the Riker girls to join the class? They seem to represent the smart set at Upper Crust Hill, and they brought at least five others along."

"Nancy, our school is the talk of Long Leigh. Lots of mothers think their girls should do something useful during the month of August, and I'd just like to see any mother find a study more useful than cooking—according to her ideas,'' said Ruth.

''And Vera is going to take an extra hour for desserts,'' Nancy went on. ''I can see Vera the pride of her family some day. Such home talent may be inherited. We haven't any of it in our family, I'm afraid,'' said Nancy, regretfully.

''But you've got something more precious,'' Ruth assured her. ''I never saw three folks so like one person as you three are, and yet you are all individually different; if you know what I mean.''

''I do,'' said Nancy. ''And you're a dear, Ruth. What would I have done out here without you?''

''Taken the stylish Vivian Riker to your heart,'' teased Ruth. ''She's a beauty.''

There was a stir outside.

''Look who's here!'' interrupted Nancy, jumping up and hurrying toward the door. ''Ted! And he's got the threatened new dog with him. Come and see!''

The threatened new dog was indeed being coaxed along by Ted, but he didn't look exactly new. In fact, his coat was matted and shaggy, his tail hung down without a bit of "pep" in it, and even his long, long-haired ears seemed too discouraged to pick up the kindest words Ted was trying to pour into them.

"Nero!" announced Ted simply, as Nancy opened the door and Ted tried to push the melancholy Nero in.

"What ails him?" Nancy asked, looking the strange animal over, critically.

"Just nothin' but lonesome," replied the small boy cryptically.

"He looks pretty—blue," Ruth commented, giving the dog a friendly but unappreciated pat on his shaggy head.

"Guess you'd be blue too, if you lived where he did," Ted told Ruth. "That poor dog hadn't a friend in the world until I found him. Here, Nero, come along and eat," ordered Ted, while Nero followed him toward the back door through the erstwhile Whatnot Shop and present-time classroom. "He's a fine dog," the little fellow continued to praise, "and when I get him all fixed up he'll be a beauty too," he insisted stoutly.

"Maybe," Nancy almost giggled as she looked after Ted and his dog. "But when you take him to the beauty shop, Ted, you better get him a real Russian bob, his hair is long enough to braid," she commented gaily.

"You can laugh," Ted retorted, "but he's a thoroughbred—a one-man dog. He won't notice you girls. Come on Nero, attaboy," chanted Ted, importantly.

But being cooks, Nancy and Ruth could do no less than offer to provide Nero's meal. Each thought he would like something else best, and each tried the other dish, pushing it under his indifferent nose and coaxing him with:

"Here Nero! Good! Eat! Eat-er-up!" etc.

But Nero merely sniffed disdainfully,

snuggled his nose deeper into his flattened paws, and turned two big, brown adoring eyes up at his young master.

"Pity about him!" quoth Nancy. "Maybe he wants some of Isabel's Cherry Moss. Just stew or beefsteak or even fried potatoes are not, it seems, on his diet bill."

They were all out on the back porch, Ted squatted squarely beside the new dog, while the girls floated around Nero, like little tugs surrounding a big steamer.

"He doesn't *have* to eat," Ted remarked indifferently, "he had a free lunch on the way over."

"He did!" screeched Nancy. "And you let us go to all this trouble!" She kicked the tin pan of water over in sheer disgust.

"Well, I thought he might like something else," murmured the small boy, provokingly. "He only had a big soup bone and loaf of bread."

Taking off their cooking-school caps and unbuttoning their aprons as they went, the girls wended their way back to the deserted class room.

"Can anyone beat that?" remarked Nancy, inelegantly. "Ted and his dog and the big—soup—bone! I could put a tune to that; a sad mournful dirgy tune."

"Wherever do you suppose he picked up the brute?" Ruth asked. "I don't remember having seen him around town."

"Oh, trust Ted," replied Nancy. "When we first came here, mother answered him once, in a most casual, unthinking way: 'Yes.' It seemed his question was could he have a dog, and mother hadn't been paying strict attention. Since then he's been on a hunt for a dog. He brought home a poor half-dead little tatters one day, but some boy followed him up and claimed the beauty. I wonder if this one will be left to him? He seems pretty particular about his food, doesn't he?"

"Yes," replied Ruth, who was just glancing out the door. Suddenly she exclaimed:

"Here's a taxi coming, and it's the one

mother always uses. I guess she's sending for me, I'll go out and see."

Nancy looked out and saw Ruth talking earnestly to the driver. She seemed to be disagreeing with the message he was giving her, and she turned abruptly to come back to Nancy.

"Imagine that!" she panted, "Mother wants me to meet a train and take an old lady to see the Hilton house. As if I could show a house to one of father's customers!" Ruth's voice betrayed actual antipathy to the very idea.

"But why not?" queried Nancy. "If she is just an old lady—"

"A rich old lady who has come a distance without notifying father's office, and there isn't a man within call to take her out," Ruth sighed miserably. The thought of showing a house seemed absolutely beyond her.

"I'll go with you," Nancy offered. "Why couldn't we show a house? We know how to call out rooms, don't we?"

Ruth jerked back her pretty head and stared at Nancy.

“All right,” she exclaimed, brightening perceptibly. “I’ll go if you promise to do the talking. I’m sure you can call off rooms and do more than that in the business line, Nancy. Let’s hurry. The train is almost due.”

So the two young “real estate ladies” were presently seated most circumspectly in the taxi, on the way to “meet a wealthy lady who wanted to look at the Hilton house.”

And Nancy was fairly aglow with the prospect of a new and interesting business adventure.

# CHAPTER XIX

## A DISCOVERY

"ISN'T she lovely? Looks like a cameo." That was Nancy's remark to Ruth when Mrs. Mortimer Cullen tarried in the sun parlor of the Hilton house, through which the girls were conducting her.

But Ruth only sighed. Her task was too obnoxious to permit of compliments even to the handsome, elderly woman, who indeed did look like an animated cameo, set in a frame of gray veils, thrown over a small summer hat.

"Isn't the garden beautiful from this porch?" Nancy enthused, joining Mrs. Cullen there. "Just look at that hedge! It's literally screened in with fine white clematis! And look! Mrs. Cullen! Just see that bower of Golden Blows! Oh, I don't believe I have ever seen such a beautiful place," and Nancy flitted around like a big butterfly herself, her yellow and white tissue dress escaping in little clouds about her, as she raced from room to room.

"My grand-daughter Naomi, is quite like you," smiled the amused lady. "If you see so much beauty here I am sure it would please her. And it is for her, principally, that I am considering coming to Long Leigh."

"Oh, I'm sure she'd love it," chirped Nancy. "But do come upstairs and see all the wonderful bay-windows. Why, this house is made just like a lot of flower bowls. Every single room opens out in—Just see these windows."

So Ruth and Mrs. Cullen followed Nancy upstairs to see the windows. From that point of vantage she dragged them to the alcove over the stairs and pointed out the "glorious garden," from that view. And she was being perfectly sincere in her enthusiasm. None of it was assumed, in fact, one would have imagined Nancy was considering buying the fine old homestead for her own use.

They spent more than an hour looking over the place and even then Nancy hated to leave.

"Imagine having a home like that," she tried to whisper to Ruth. "I think I'd be satisfied even to do housework if I could look out that kitchen window as I did it," she added, while Mrs. Cullen smiled her satisfaction into Nancy's eager face.

They drove back to the train with the prospective customer, who, when taking her leave, glanced significantly at Nancy.

"My dear," she said, " you gave me a very pleasant little visit to your pretty Long Leigh, and I hope if my grand-daughter, Naomi, comes here—ever, she will meet you." She then touched Ruth's hand gently, saying something about having her father's office get in touch with her.

When the train had cleared the station the two girls broke into a much relieved giggle. Ruth declared that Nancy had won the heart of "Lady Cullen who is as rich as they come," she explained, inelegantly.

"And I had such a good time—"

"Whoa there! No, you don't, Antionette Brandon," Ruth warned Nancy. "You are *not* going in the real-estate business, so you needn't get all set for it. My father has a family to feed—"

But the very gentleman spoken of was at that moment hurrying across the platform, to meet the two uproarious girls.

He was most anxious to know about their mission. Mrs. Cullen, it appeared, was a very important personage, and he regretted genuinely the absence from his office of a suitable escort for the lady.

"Oh, you needn't worry, Daddy," Ruth assured him, taking the city newspaper from one of his pockets and feeling for candy in the other. "Nancy took such good care of her that she almost stayed over to buy more houses. You'll have to look out for Nancy, Dad." Ruth continued to joke.

"She's an expert business man, you know, and might take a notion to try real-estate."

"The more the merrier," replied the genial gentleman, who, like Ruth, had great gray eyes and a clear florid complexion, "I've been wanting to see your mother, Nancy," he said next. "Maybe, I could suit her better in a house than you are being suited in the Townsend place," he ventured.

"Oh, we love it over there," Nancy hurried to state. "And besides, Mr. Ashley, we're just poor folks," she added laughingly.

"So are we all of us," joined in Mr. Ashley. "But I supposed, now that Sanders has struck his gold mine, he might want to buy the little place himself, sort of souvenir, you know." As they talked, they were walking back to the waiting taxi, in which the girls had fetched Mrs. Cullen to the station.

"Now Daddy," objected Ruth, "we've had enough business for one afternoon. Nancy must get back home and I've got a music lesson, if Miss Dudley has waited for me, and I hope she hasn't."

Nancy felt rather important stepping out of the taxi at her door, it seemed, somehow, much more business-like than just riding in someone's private car, and she dashed up the store steps, still thrilled with enthusiasm from her experience.

Inside the door she found Ted, crouched before the fireplace urging Nero to "sic" something.

"Get him, boy!" he was coaxing. "Go-get-him!"

"Get whom?" Nancy asked, in surprise at the spectacle.

"What ever is in that chimney," the boy replied. "Do you think Nero couldn't get it as good as that puny little dog of Miss Townsend's?"

"But how do you know anything is in there?"

"Heard it—it whistles. Besides you said so." Ted was not a waster of words.

"I never said there was anything there," Nancy argued. "But what whistled? What did you hear?"

"Just whistlin'. Sic him Nero!" and Ted tried to push the big shaggy head against the old-fashioned fireplace board, that was papered with a very brilliant and hideous set paper piece, the center representing a terrible time among birds that looked like freak chickens.

But Nero was absolutely deaf to Ted's entreaties. No more would he "go for" the chimney than he went for the food offered him by the solicitous young domestic science students, Nancy and Ruth.

"I don't think you should keep that big—untidy dog in here, Ted," remonstrated Nancy, who hesitated over calling Nero "dirty" and felt foolish at calling him "untidy." She crossed to the corner of the store and raised a window. "You know," she continued, "this is a cooking school and everything has to be strictly sanitary."

"He's strictly sanitary," Ted declared, pressing his own curly head down to Nero's.

"I'm glad I've got him, I needed a chum around home," he finished, affectionately.

"How about me?" teased Nancy.

"Oh you!" Ted was caressing Nero, and Nero was thudding his tail in response.

"Yes, what about me, Ted? Don't you like me any more?"

"Like you! But you ought to hear folks talk. They say you'll be starting a—butcher shop next."

Nancy drew her breath in sharply. Were they criticising her like that?

"Who's talking about me?" she demanded of her brother.

"Don't have to get mad," drawled Ted. "What do we care? We know, I guess," he placated, tactfully.

"But who's talking?" she insisted.

"It's all jealousy," the boy evaded. "They're disappointed because the Townsends and Mr. Sanders are getting along so well. First, they tried to make Mr. Sanders out foolish, and now they say this place is spooky. Guess I've been here long enough to know," he retorted, as if answering the unknown foes.

But Nancy was stricken with that painful self-consciousness that so often lately had taken possession of her. The changeable girl, even her friends were calling her; why did she so love—to change?

"Look!" whispered Ted, directing her attention to the dog. "He—hears—it!"

Nero was now alert, head cocked to one side, ears pricked up, and every dog-feature of him ready to pounce.

Ted and Nancy watched him, breathless.

A little snapping bark, a growl, long and threatening; then a wild, fierce howl, and the big creature dashed against the fireboard!

"There!" exclaimed Ted. "I told you so!"

"What is it?" gasped Nancy.

But the barking of Nero shut out even the sound of their voices, and as brother and sister looked on, the big dog pawed the fireboard, scratching away the paper, birds, flowers, impossible sky and all.

Presently he turned from that attack and dashed to the back door. Ted and Nancy were quick to follow him.

"Let him out," Nancy directed. "He may know there's someone around."

Unhooking the screen door Ted let his dog out. With a bounding leap Nero cleared the steps and dashed around the house to the chimney corner.

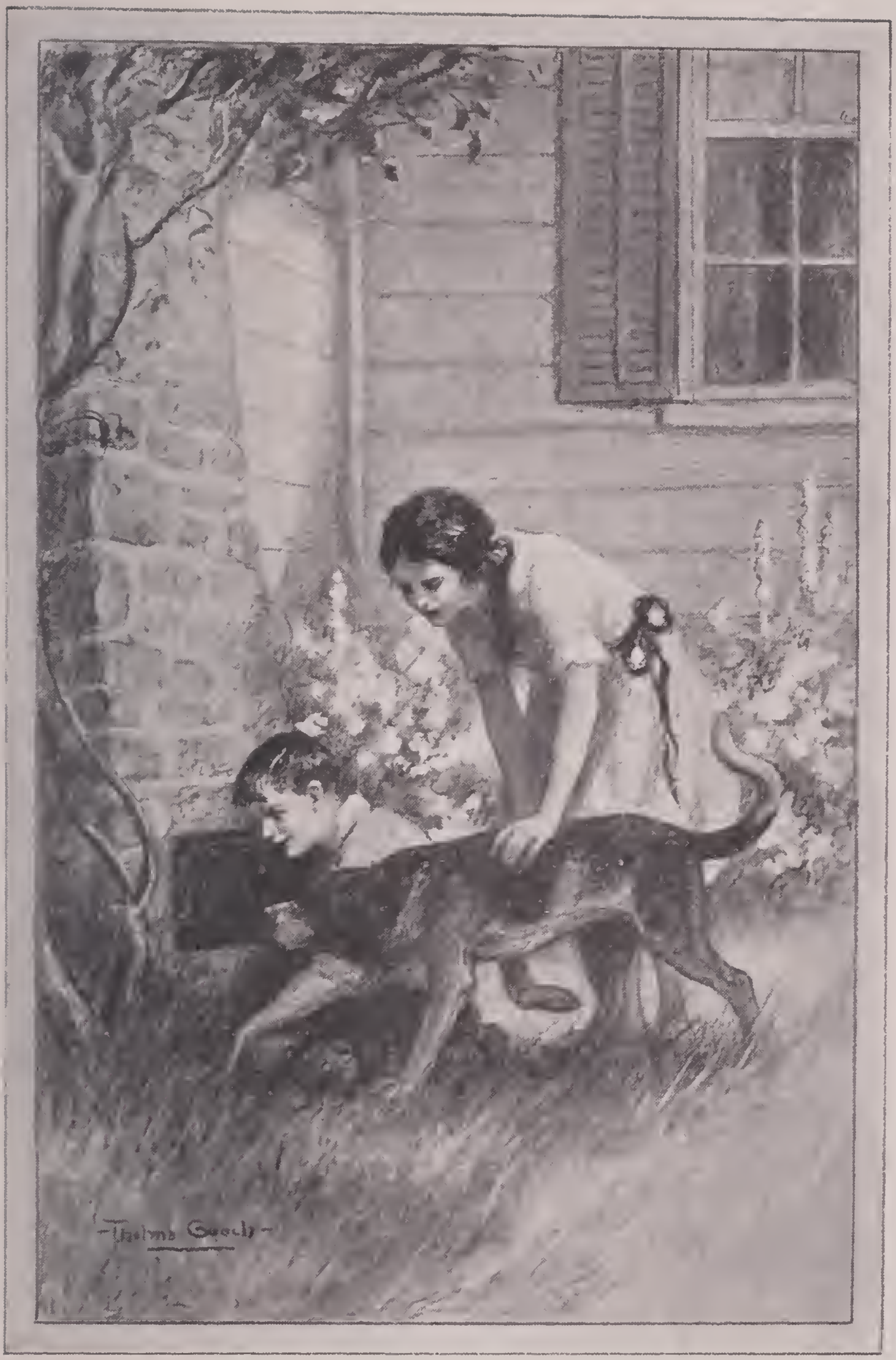
"Look!" screamed Nancy, "there—goes—a—man!"

As she pointed to the farthest corner of the lot, where the fence was broken down to admit a short cut to the avenue, they saw a man, just stepping through the brush.

"Mr. Sanders!" exclaimed Ted. "I see his bald head!"

"Mr. Sanders," Nancy repeated. "What can he have been doing here?"

"That's what Nero is trying to find out,"


Thelma Gooch

Ted had his ear cocked to the small iron door.

replied Ted, dryly. "Let's see how he's making out. He's stopped barking. Maybe —he's—got—it."

It took but a few moments to reach the side of the house, where the old-fashioned stone foundation was broken by a place, through which the ashes from the fireplace had once been cleaned out. Here sat Nero. He wagged his tail happily as Ted came up, and he now seemed perfectly satisfied and contented.

"What is it Nero?" Nancy coaxed patting the dog in a most friendly way. He was evidently winning her affection as well as Ted's.

But Ted knew best how to follow the animal's lead. He was down on his knees in front of the mossy stones and had his ear cocked to the small iron door.

"Yep," he sort of gasped. "It's there! It's kinda-tickin'."

"Let me listen," Nancy asked, dropping down beside him.

For some time brother, sister and the big dog were all crouched there, attentive, eager and somewhat excited.

"Just a little sound—like an egg-beater," Nancy suggested. "And look, Ted, those broken weeds! Mr. Sanders must have been in here just now."

"Sure, it's his," said Ted, in a manner as matter of fact as if an egg-beater "whistling" in the old fireplace was the most ordinary thing in the world to expect being put there by Mr. Sanders.

# CHAPTER XX

## THE MIDNIGHT ALARM

It was a very exciting story, indeed, that Ted and Nancy poured into their mother's ears that evening. Had she any possible objections to adopting Nero as the fourth member of the family, they must have been quickly dispelled with the graphic account of that animal's uncanny intelligence.

"He seemed to know just where to find the outlet to the chimney,'" Nancy said, "for he ran directly to the little furnace place, and we didn't really know it was there ourselves."

"Of course, he knew," said Ted importantly. "Dogs know lots of things that we don't. And he's going to sleep in the store, isn't he, Mother?"

"Oh, not in the store, Ted," objected Nancy. "Do you think that would be just right, Manny?"

"Well, a big dog like that," demurred Miss Manners, who, now being a real resident of the Brandon home, shared their table with them.

"But he's had a swim and he's as clean as —as anything," floundered the boy, quite unable to summon an appropriate comparison for his great friend. "And Mother, he can watch the whole house for us. How do we know someone wouldn't try to steal— the secret of the chimney place?"

"It isn't our secret," retorted Nancy, "and for my part I can't see what right Mr. Sanders has around our place at all."

"You can depend, dear," said Mrs. Brandon gently, "that whatever he has put in the chimney, if anything, it is something that could in no way bother us. Mr. Sanders is a professor, and the old-fashioned stone oven may have some special interest for him."

"But couldn't he ask us about it, if he wanted to—to plant a bomb there?" Nancy remarked, superciliously.

"He's no gabber," said Ted, with more wisdom than elegance. "And anyway, maybe he didn't. But Mother, may I have the old steamer rug to make a bed for Nero? He's so big he needs a big bed."

It was finally agreed that Nero should be allowed to sleep in the store before the fire-board, and after much work making the rug into a bed for him, Ted eventually got him to try it.

Very slowly the big shaggy creature sprawled himself out on the soft wool, but he only stayed sprawled for a few moments. The next, he got up, took a corner of the rug between his teeth, dragged it over to the show gas-range and, in a dog's way, proceeded to make his own bed.

Every one was watching him and every one laughed.

"He can do tricks," Ted declared proudly. "I'm goin' to train him for a lot of things. He could almost do anything," the boy added, whereat even Miss Manners laughed softly.

But Nero was settled at last, and so far as he was concerned, gave no further trouble to the Brandon family for that evening. The subject of the buzzing, egg-beater noise in the chimney, coupled with Mr. Sanders leaving the grounds so suspiciously that afternoon was, however, discussed most thoroughly.

Even to the children Mrs. Brandon's confidence in Mr. Sanders, agreeing as it did with the confidence of so many other grown folks, gave cause for much curious speculation. Nancy pretended that she disagreed with this general sentiment, but that was only because she felt there was a certain injustice in the manner of Mr. Sanders assuming rights over their personal property.

Ted, on the contrary, was ready to vote for Mr. Sanders at every opportunity, and while he didn't exactly say that Nero had at one time belonged to the people who had lived in the big stone house, he *did* say that Lou Peters, who gave him Nero, said that the Giffords, who belonged on the hill, used to feed Nero regularly at their back door. That was as near to proprietorship as Ted could bring Nero. Lou Peters had been keeping him among the old boxes, so he gave him to Ted. All of which followed a natural sequence, for Ted himself had been feeding Nero dog biscuits and soup bones for a long time previously.

"Isn't it queer how jolly it seems to have a dog in the house," remarked the boy, who was curled up on the couch and hugging a big story book from which, tonight at least, he read very little.

"It does seem as if we have pleasant company," Miss Manners conceded agreeably. She was, as usual, at her fancy work—some exquisitely fine linen drawn work, being done for a city customer.

"But I thought we all agreed never again to become attached to a dog," recalled the mother. She was making notes and reading a book—a librarian's method of reviewing.

"We all felt so dreadfully when Grumpy

died,'' Nancy recalled. She sighed effectively at the recollection. ''Grumpy was the loveliest dog—''

''So is Nero,'' affirmed the fickle Ted. ''In some ways he's a lot smarter. You should have seen him do tricks for Lou Peters. He'll do them for me, too,'' professed the youngster, ''as soon as we get better acquainted.''

''Oh, Ted,'' digressed Nancy. ''I've been wanting to ask you. Did Billy and Jack make out all right at home after their cave-in scare? Their folks weren't angry, were they?''

''Angry!'' scoffed Ted. ''They each got a quarter for ice cream cones; that's how angry their mothers were. Jack and Bill are two—pets,'' he finished, rather contemptuously. ''If they hadn't been so soft they'd have known how to dig themselves out. Guess I'll go to bed,'' Ted then announced suddenly and surprisingly, for he usually wanted to remain up even longer than the others.

"Now, that Nero is asleep," teased Nancy. "But never mind, Ted," she amended. "I'll give you credit for picking a fine dog. He's handsomer than a collie, and not so awkward as a St. Bernard," Nancy commented, rather critically.

"Sure," agreed Ted. "He's a thoroughbred," and with that all-meaning compliment, Ted put his book upon the shelf, looked very carefully in the store so as not to disturb the distinguished occupant, and almost whispered good-night, kissing his mother fondly as he took his actual leave.

"Ted does love that dog," Nancy remarked indulgently. "And I'm glad you let him keep him, Mother, for Ted likes to wander off alone and a dog is good company for him."

"The dear little fellow!" murmured his mother. "I can hardly believe he is growing up and becoming able to look after himself. So often during the day, I stop and wonder—"

"Oh, you needn't, Mums," interrupted

Nancy, "for Manny barely lets him out of her sight without all kinds of cautions. It's lovely since Manny came," Nancy concluded, a little shyly.

Following all this each of the three applied herself to her task, (Nancy was reading,) until the clock struck ten, then it appeared time to follow Ted's example and retire, which they did.

It had to happen, it always does. The dog barked wildly in the very blackest part of the night, and before they realized what had disturbed them, the Brandon household was awake and on its feet!

"What can—it—be?" breathed little Miss Manners, wrapping her neat robe closely around her.

"Why, it's Nero," answered Ted foolishly, although he was not trying to be funny. "He's after someone. We're safe."

But Ted's unlimited confidence in his dog's power to protect, did not lessen the uncanny feeling produced by the midnight howling, growling bark.

Mrs. Brandon did what she could to assure Nancy and Miss Manners that dogs often bark at almost nothing, but when she heard Nero's paws scratching against the door that led from the hall into the little group of sleeping rooms, her own courage sagged somewhat.

"Let him in!" ordered Ted. "Here, let me!" he corrected, going to the door and meeting bravely the wild greeting of Nero. "What is it, boy?" he asked. 'What's the matter?"

To which question Nero threw his two great paws against Ted's chest, barked not fiercely, but in that talking way dogs have, and then turned to race back down the stairs.

"It's no one he's after," explained Ted, "or he wouldn't leave them to come up and tell me. He wants to show me something—"

"Ted Brandon!" cried Nancy. "Don't you dare go down—"

"I'll go along," volunteered Mrs. Brandon. "As Ted says, the dog would have stood guard if any one were trying to get in."

There was no use in further arguing, for Ted was already close on Nero's heels, following him to the store whence he was leading. Mrs. Brandon may have been timid, but small Ted's confidence in his dog was very fortifying, and she, too, fell in with the small midnight procession.

Nancy did not remain upstairs, neither did Miss Manners, for somehow it always does seem safer to "stick together" in that sort of trouble.

No one spoke as they followed the dog. With great dignity he led them on, until, upon reaching the store, he made a pounce over to the corner near the chimney.

"Oh," screamed Nancy. "It's that old chimney—"

"It's something else," exclaimed Ted.

"Just look here! A 'busted' water pipe. That's what it is! Look—at—the—flood!"

They all looked, and saw, issuing from a pipe that was connected near the fireplace, a very positive and very menacing stream of water.

"Oh, my! Our things!" groaned Nancy. "I've got to turn the water off."

"But where? How?" asked Mrs. Brandon in confusion, fully realizing the damage water could do.

"I know," replied Nancy, in her best business-like manner. "I was 'monkeying' with it the other day. It won't take me a jiffy," and while the others patted the intelligent Nero for his alarm, Nancy flew to the kitchen, got a wrench from Ted's tool chest in the little corner closet, and then with one sure, swift turn, reversed the handle on the water pipe that led from the boiler to the pipes from the cellar.

"It's off," yelled Ted. "That's all right, Nan, it's stopped."

"Why, daughter," exclaimed Mrs. Brandon, still breathless, "how did you know how to do—that?"

"Because—she's a good plumber," declared Ted. "Hurrah! Nan! Let's start a plumbing shop! That's something you—haven't tried yet."

"Ted!" said Nancy sharply. "I don't like being made fun of. Anybody ought to know how to turn off a water pipe. We all know how to turn off the gas, don't we?"

"Ted didn't mean to be rude, dear," Mrs. Brandon assured the injured one, "but we were so surprised."

"And Nancy does seem to have such a talent for business," ventured Miss Manners. "I tell you, dear," and she gathered her robe around her as she followed the others out of the store, "it is something to be proud of. Any of us can be just housekeepers, but it takes a different sort of ability to be—the man of the house," she said, which was an unusual figure of speech for prim Miss Manners to make use of.

"She can't be that," objected Ted.

"Very well, then," said Nancy. "Let's see you mop up that floor, Ted," she challenged. "That's a plumber's job, too," she pointed out. But it was Mrs. Brandon who found the mop and Ted who used it. Nancy felt perhaps, that the executive part, in turning off the water, was enough for her to have done.

She was hurt, unwillingly, at Ted's joking remark.

"A plumber shop," she reflected mentally. "Well, one could do worse, for plumbers are necessary and needle-work fiends aren't. Maybe I will take up something practical before I find what would be best for me," she continued to reason.

But none of them knew, nor was it possible for them to guess, what Nero had saved in his timely midnight alarm.

# CHAPTER XXI

## FOR VALUE RECEIVED

It seemed but a very short time later that Nancy was again awakened. But now the sunshine was streaming into her room, and she heard Miss Manners talking down in the hall, in a suppressed voice.

"The children are not up yet," she was saying. "But come in, Ruth. You see we were somewhat disturbed—"

"Come on up, Ruth!" called out Nancy. "Come up and hear about our par-tee!"

Ruth came up promptly, and the story of the broken water pipe was presently being told her, brokenly.

"How perfectly—thrill-ing!" she commented in her well known characterization of the affected Vera. "But you should have had Nero turn off the water—"

“I’ll bet he could too,” shouted Ted from his room. Ted never lost a chance to praise Nero.

“But just listen to *my* story,” Ruth begged. “I’ve got a thrilling yarn, too.”

“Then, wait until I get propped up for it,” ordered Nancy. “I can’t hear comfortably when I’m down.” She put her two pillows under her shoulders and assumed a most affected air of the tired society girl after her dance. Even a cap was improvised from a twisted stocking, a lacy robe was concocted from her thin, soft slip, and the luxurious effect was completed by Ruth piling upon the bed a bunch of mussed up store paper—the morning mail!

“There now,” said Ruth, “I hope you can hear. Although I must say you are not well cast. The character for you, Nan, is that of a short haired lady at a big desk, her eyes bulging out of goggles and her waist line strapped into a belt. You know—”

“Yes, I know,” admitted Nancy, “but I like this better—it’s more becoming, isn’t it?" Another pose and a shift of the lacy robe. Then Nancy appeared ready to hear Ruth's story.

"You sold the place!" Ruth blurted out without a hint of its coming.

"The place?"

"Yes. To Lady Cullen. And she said positively over the long distance last night to Dad, that she never would have bought it but for you."

"Of course, she would," scoffed Nancy.

"Nope. Dad said that place just wouldn't sell. He and his men have shown it to so many. But dear Mrs. Cullen!" Ruth sighed foolishly. "She told Dad that the young lady was so enthusiastic over the place that she was positive her granddaughter, Naomi, would react in the same way. Notice that Nan, re-act."

"Yeah," drawled Nancy. "That's what this is—I'm—re-acting," and she fell further back among her pillows.

"But really, Nan, it is true," insisted Ruth, laying hold of one of Nancy's long, slender hands. "And you needn't blush about it, either. "I think the way you blush under that olive skin of yours—" But a pillow, vigorously applied to Ruth's face, checked further compliments.

"If you don't want to hear," Ruth presently continued.

"Of course I do. I'm just as glad as glad, Ruth, that your dad has sold the place, but I know very well Mrs. Cullen would have bought it anyhow."

"She wouldn't. Dad says so, she says so —I say—says—so," declared Ruth. "And if you don't believe it just listen to this." She changed her position sitting up very straight and facing Nancy very positively to make the statement most emphatic. "Mrs. Cullen very tactfully suggested that your interest and your success be—remunerated."

"Ruth!"

"Now, don't let me hurt your feelings, Nan, but Dad would honestly love to have you accept."

"I won't," declared Nancy, blushing furiously now. "The idea—"

"Then, he will talk to your mother about it. Do you know, little girl, what a lot of money a big sale like that brings to Dad's firm? And how much he would have to pay out in commission to the man who succeeded in making the sale?"

"I know one thing," said Nancy, shifting herself out of the bed and planting two bare feet firmly upon the floor, "I'm being made a business woman, a store-keeper, a cooking school director, a plumber and now a real-estate agent. I don't mind being a few things but that's quite a—lot!"

"You haven't said Enthusiast," Ruth reminded her, "that is what counts most. But Nancy, you really ought to consider," pressed Ruth. "The money would mean so much to your mother, and you have a perfect right to it. I knew the way you were tearing around that big place, that you would flim-flam Cullen," joked Ruth.

"And Dad says, a hundred dollars isn't anything on a fifteen thousand dollar deal—"

"Fifteen thousand!"

"Yes, all of that. And here's the little one hundred check," Ruth was pressing a slip of paper into Nancy's unwilling hand. "Dad will be dreadfully disappointed if you refuse—you're not too proud, are you?"

"Too proud!" and the black eyes snapped little pin points of sparks. "No, indeed, I mean to be a business woman, like mother, and I don't care how soon I start," proclaimed Nancy, firmly.

"Spoken like—Nancy Brandon!" hailed Ruth, gleefully, for she had known all along what a task it would be to get Nancy to take the check. And just as she had honestly stated, the amount given Nancy was but a small fraction of that which a man from Mr. Ashley's office would have had to receive for the same service.

Unbelieving, Nancy stared at the check.

"One hundred dollars!" she murmured,

her eyes now beaming with anticipation. "And mother's vacation only three days off!"

"But please, Nan," Ruth hurried to change the subject, "don't go away to parts unknown and leave me pining here. Of course, there are lots of girls—hanging around," she smiled very prettily and looked very dimply as she said this, "but since you came to Long Leigh, Nan, the other girls don't count as much as they did."

"I suppose," said Nancy in her "twinkling" way, "that may be because I'm such a freak. I'm a lot of fun—"

"Nan—cee!"

"Ruth—ee!"

And they finished the argument with a very pardonable show of affection, if it was only a sound slap on Nancy's not fully clothed shoulders and a pretty good whack on Ruth's plump little thigh.

When Nancy was alone again, (for Ruth was to meet the girls at Isabel's and they were all going for a swim before their ten o'clock cooking lesson,) she smoothed out the little blue check lovingly. It was so strange to think that money was acquired through mere enthusiasm. That Mrs. Cullen would have decided to buy that enormous place merely upon Nancy's—enthusiasm. That the cooking school had been started and was successfully running because of her—enthusiasm!

"Perhaps," she told the reflection in her glass, "it's a good thing to despise some kinds of work if it makes one enthusiastic for other kinds. But even now," she was insisting to that same mocking smile, "*I can* make a very good cake."

To meet the girls at the lake, Nancy took a short cut up, over the hill that would lead her past the old stone house. She had hurried her breakfast and made sure that Miss Manners did not need her help to get ready for the class, then, gowned in the easiest thing to put on—and off, her lavender gingham, she raced off up the hill.

But she never could hurry past the stone house; everything around it held fascination for Nancy, even the half-formed dread that someone or something would drop down from the sky, or spring up out of the earth, as Mr. Sanders had formerly been accused of doing. So, instead of crossing the fence where the old cedar tree had broken through and had thus made an opening, Nancy continued on up through the stone path that would bring her out at the apple orchard.

"As if there could be anything weird in this open place," she was saying. "Why, the old cistern over there looks as spic-span as when folks used to draw water from it, and I'm sure," she was thinking, "a turned upside-down rain-barrel shows care and attention—no mosquitoes can breed in that."

She stood a few moments to enjoy the soft summer scene, for it was not yet quite time to meet the girls, when from the direction of the rain-barrel she head a whine, a cat's cry, surely.

"Some poor cat maybe caught in briars," Nancy decided promptly, as again came a piteous meaow of a kitten or a cat.

Following the call Nancy hurried in its direction.

"Here puss?" she called. "Kitty-kitty-kitty!"

The cry stopped as her voice called to it. It was not near the rain barrel, Nancy now decided, but over by the cistern. Quickly she turned in that direction, but when within a few feet of the square little box that covered the artificial well, she was suddenly startled by a noise—a queer noise.

"What's that?" was her unspoken question.

She listened. It was a man's voice, singing!

"Where, where—can that be!" she murmured half aloud, meanwhile unconsciously walking toward the cistern.

Then a hammering! A buzzing!

"Oh!" screamed Nancy in alarm, now realizing that she had been hearing something very strange indeed. "Oh, I must—get—away!" was her wild determination, as she turned and dashed down the hill, making her way this time through the opening in the fence where the cedar tree had fallen.

# CHAPTER XXII

## TARTS AND LADY FINGERS

No one would believe her. They all came out of the water as Nancy arrived at the beach, and declined positively, to go in.

"I'm too—flustered," she insisted. "My head is swimming now and it doesn't matter about my heels."

"But Nancy," protested Marion Mason, one of the Upper Crust Hill girls, "how could you have heard anybody or anything in that open field? No bushes nor trees big enough to hide behind, just there."

"It was the cat," insisted Christine Berg, a friend of Marion's. "There are queer cats—always have been—around the old stone house. First, the cat meaowed, just to entice you," said Christine, wringing out the scant skirt of her black satin bathing suit. "And then, when she got you over there, she did the rest,'' finished the very blonde girl with the lovely hazel eyes.

''Sort of ventriloquist,'' added Isabel. ''Well, at any rate, Nan, you have had a thrill. Vera, wouldn't that constitute a thrill, don't you think?''

''I'll tell you what *I* think,'' chimed in Ruth. ''I think we had better hurry to dress or we shall be late for our lesson, and mine is cream-puffs today. Our family can eat cream-puffs until the puff—'' But the girls, running up to the little bath houses, deprived Ruth of her audience, and also of the necessity of finishing her simile.

Nancy sat on the little board-walk edge of the row of houses, while the girls dressed. Ruth finished first and joined her there.

''Really, Nan?'' she quizzed, in an under tone.

''Most certainly—really,'' replied Nancy, seriously. ''Do you suppose I would make that up for fun?''

''No, I don't. It isn't your brand of fun. But it's mighty curious. Do you suppose we should all go up there right now, and go over every inch of the place—"

"Oh, no. We must go back to Manny and be good cooks," Nancy answered. "Besides Ruth, she has my check and I'm anxious to see if it is still there, not just a dream check you know," she smiled understandingly at Ruth.

Rather towsled from their bath, and the lack of time and tools for hair arrangements, the party of girls presently started off to take their domestic science lesson. Along the way they met and hailed a number of friends, for at bathing hour the lake drew folks from all parts of the village and its suburbs, but there was no time for tarrying as Miss Manners insisted upon promptness, and no one willingly ever disregarded her rule.

It was a merry little group that, all aproned and capped, listened first to Miss Manners explanation of rules and reasons, and then they themselves undertook the practical art of applying this knowledge.

But Nancy could not forget her experience. It had been so weird, so wild, in fact, to hear those noises coming from nowhere.

Ruth was beating the eggs light as air for her cherished cream puffs; Isabel was carefully creaming an equally dainty concoction in her middle-sized yellow bowl, and the other girls were being similarly and as practically engaged, when a shadow, a large manly shadow, darkened the glass that formed the upper part of the store door.

"A visitor!" exclaimed Marion, smoothing her cap at the risk of spoiling her batter.

Miss Manners stepped to the door to answer the knock.

"Mr. Sanders!" the girls whispered one to another, as they saw Miss Manners greet the caller.

"Maybe he's going to inspect—" Christine began, but was stopped by Miss Manners speaking.

"Girls," she said, in her best teacher

voice, "Mr. Sanders has called to see if we can fill an order for him."

"An order!" chorused the surprised pupils.

"Yes," spoke up the one man among them. "The fact is, young ladies, I'm giving a little party up at Waterfall House, and I felt convinced that my attractions would be greatly increased if I could procure some—some confections from this famous little class," he said.

Miss Manners was all but protesting. That her class could be called "famous" seemed to her rather too extravagant a statement.

"Yes, indeed," went on the caller, while it must be admitted some of the girls were stifling giggles. "My daughter is coming up, and she thinks her college excells in this sort of thing." His sweeping gesture seemed to include everything, even the girls. "And I would be mighty glad to show her what we can do in our little Long Leigh."

Followed suggestions and questions, so heaped up that the mere wording of all the excitement amounted to little compared with its general effect. Finally, Mr. Sanders and Miss Manners went into a secret session, to outline the order, and the girls, who were supposed to go on with the lesson, in reality went on with the fun.

"Imagine!" chuckled Eleanor Dixon, "getting an order for fancy cakes! I'm going to make kisses—"

"Lady fingers, would be more appropriate," Isabel remarked sagely, "although, El, I have heard Miss Manners say, your biscuits are—splendid."

"Tarts!" whispered Christine, shaking her long handled spoon, and making a comical face.

"Mac-a-roons!" came from Dorothy's corner.

But Mr. Sanders was now preparing to leave, and Miss Manners was conducting him to the door, her face alight with the pleasant excitement. As the caller walked past Nancy he said to her in an undertone:

"Can I speak to you, just a minute, Nancy?"

Without answering Nancy followed him outside to the porch.

"I'm coming up to see your mother this evening," he said, when their voices were beyond reach of the others. "I've been expecting to for some time, but now I *must*. Will you tell her, please? And be sure to be on hand yourself, you and Ted, for I'm about ready to disclose the long promised secret," he finished, his eyes twinkling merrily as he spoke.

"Oh, all right, certainly," faltered Nancy, not quite sure just what she was saying.

"Yes," continued Mr. Sanders, "the summer, is going fast and I'm glad things have shaped themselves before we were, any of us, forced to separate." He was patting his brown hands together gleefully.

"Would you mind if Isabel and Ruth came over? They're my best friends and you can trust them," ventured Nancy, surprised at herself for doing so.

"Certainly, by all means, have them come," replied Mr. Sanders. "I see you anticipate a surprise, and you are generous enough to want to share it with your friends. That's the spirit I like to see. Tonight it will be a sort of private performance," he smiled as he said this, "but tomorrow night at the hotel I'm going to tell all who come. That's what I want your cakes for," he finished, moving down the low steps. "We're going to have a celebration and—well, I'll see you this evening," he promised, hurrying off like a happy school boy.

There was little work done in the cooking lesson after that. Everybody was so excited at the prospect of filling a real order, that the entire class immediately set to planning just how it was to be filled.

It was Christine, however, who had what Ruth called "the inspiration." After the class was dismissed she got the girls together, out of Miss Manner's hearing, and made her suggestion.

"Let's all come early," she began, "*very* early. We'll do our very best, of course, we can make wonderful cakes."

"*You* can," corrected Nancy.

"So can you, Nan," Christine took time to say, "I'd like to see any one make a better sponge cake—"

"Oh, sponge cake," scoffed Nancy.

"The very thing most needed to go with ice cream," Christine hurried to say. "But listen—"

"We are," said Ruth.

"We will take whatever money we get for the entire order, (we donate the materials, of course,) and with the money we'll buy a gift for—Manny!" said Christine.

"Hurrah!" came a hushed hail, for there was danger of the plans being overheard.

However, Christine's idea was enthusiastically received, and there was no possible doubt of the entire plan being successfully carried out.

Ruth remained with Nancy and so did Isabel, so that she readily found an opportunity to tell them of Mr. Sander's message. They were as usual, putting things away, Miss Manners being obliged to leave early to give a private lesson to an invalid girl.

"And we are actually going to hear the secret," gasped Nancy. "Girls, you don't know how excited I am—"

"You don't know how *crazy* I am," added Ruth.

"And how *wild* I am," put in Isabel. "Think we should have a doctor within call? Will it be overwhelming?" she joked.

"Better have a policeman," suggested Ruth. "He may disclose some gems, or other valuables."

"Here comes Ted," Nancy interrupted, "and I know by his walk that he's worried."

Ted strode in, Nero close beside him, and as Nancy had intimated he did act worried.

"What's the matter, Ted?" Ruth asked first.

"Matter? I've got to hide this dog.

Folks want to take him away from me. Say he's theirs," Ted's words fairly hissed his indignation.

"Who says so?" demanded Nancy belligerently.

"A man who came up to the old stone house," answered Ted. "But Nero was Lou Peter's dog and Lou gave him to me, and not all the money there is, is going to get my dog away from me."

Ted's voice was not very positive, and the girls, all three, assisted him in coaxing Nero out to the small door under the back porch, where he was finally made a prisoner, with several plates of food set before him to lighten the misery.

It surely would be disastrous for Ted to lose his dog.

# CHAPTER XXIII

## THE STORY TOLD

THE Whatnot Shop was quite powerless to prevent the invasion.

"We'll push all the tables back and set the chairs around in a half-circle," suggested the fluttered Nancy. "Then, it will be just like—"

"A play," finished Isabel. "Too bad we can't turn on a spot light."

"I think it would be nice to let Mr. Townsend sit behind the counter on his old high stool," Nancy further suggested. "It might make him feel at home. I wonder where we put that stool."

"Away back in the corner under the three-cornered shelf," Ruth informed her. "I rammed it in there myself."

It was dragged out—the stool, and set just where it had been found when Nancy first took possession of the shop.

"A regular par-tee!" chanted Isabel. "Glad I happened to wear a white dress; being a deb and all that."

"You may carry the white paper fan, little deb," mocked Nancy. "We couldn't sell it so I'd be delighted to donate it to your coming out party."

"Oh, it isn't mine, it's yours," chirped Isabel, "and I hope you are not going to wear that howling yellow gingham—"

"I am. Yellow's my color," and Nancy flipped the skirt of her dress around gaily.

They were preparing, as might easily be guessed, for the "private performance" promised by Mr. Sanders. Nancy had talked with him over the phone, after his visit to the class that morning, and arrangements were then made to invite the Townsends over, besides permission having been granted Ted to bring in his chum, Buster Clayton. Just now Ted was upstairs dressing; also singing and telling stories to Nero, most of which racket could be heard down in the store.

Mrs. Brandon's cheeks became soft as damask when Nancy showed her the big check for one hundred dollars, which Nancy explained was in no sense a gift, but purely part of a business transaction between her and Mr. Ashley's real-estate office. The mother did not try to hide her delight, that Nancy should have become such "a splendid little business woman," and she predicted her own retirement from the office at an early date, if such wonderful achievements were to be kept up.

"And your bank account, my dear," she told Nancy when they were in confidence over the developments, "aren't you proud of it?"

"A little, Mother-mine," faltered the happy girl, "but there's something better than that," she said shyly, for Nancy was not given to boasting.

"I know," and the mother arms went around her. "Besides, you know now that even despised housework is not so bad when it has an interesting motive. That's why we mothers tolerate it; because we are working for our darling children.''

''I know, Mums, but I really only thought 'dishes' before, now I think—''

''The joy of helping *us,''* Mrs. Brandon supplied. ''And I'm so proud of your cooking, and how much it has benefited Miss Manners, as well as your friends. Why, my dear, I would make you vain were I to tell you one-half of what I hear—''

''Not vain, Mums. I'm not silly enough for that, for I've got to admit I've been rather selfish all the way through—it has been such a lot of fun.''

And Nancy meant it. She was not posing, nor was she playing at being humble, for her mind was of that quality that reasons and analyzes one's own motives as well as looking for motives in others. In that way she had acquired what is called ''common sense,'' perhaps because every one should try, at least, to possess a measure of it.

Now Mrs. Brandon, as well as Ted, was

dressing. To please Nancy she had promised to wear her geranium georgette, a soft dress that toned so well with her dark hair and dark eyes, for Mrs. Brandon was still young, and a handsome woman.

And the girls were fairly dancing around the store, arranging chairs brought in from the porch, dining room and even from the kitchen.

"Let's make a little platform for Mr. Sanders," Ruth proposed. "This top step of the back stairs will do. We don't have to open that door."

"And have a stand and a glass of water—" Isabel added.

"And flowers," insisted Nancy. "I must have flowers, they're so silly for a man's speech, they'll make every body laugh."

"Maybe hollyhocks would," Ruth said, "but I doubt if your audience would see the joke if you put a bunch of roses there."

So they progressed, until very soon, too soon for the girls, the company began to arrive.

Mr. and Miss Townsend, and little, brown, woolly Tiny came first.

"I'm afraid we're early," said the lady in her best silver silk dress and her very pretty new black-satin-trimmed-with-silver grapes, hat. She carried a little flat cushion for Tiny, out of respect for the silver silk dress.

"Mother will be down directly," Nancy greeted Miss Townsend, in her very best manner. "Sit over here. We've fixed this corner for you."

"Oh my!" exclaimed the lady in genuine admiration. "How lovely everything looks! However did you paint this old wood work white?"

"For our cooking class, you know," replied Nancy, gaily. "Doesn't it look—hygienic?"

"I—should—say—so!" Miss Townsend was aghast. "And I suppose, those spotless tables—"

"Are the old ones from around the porches and every place," Nancy informed her. "We just daubed the legs white and covered the tops with oil cloth."

"And I want to see that gas range. I've heard so much about it. Oh! there's Miss Manners," exclaimed Miss Townsend, "she'll explain it to me, and you may run along, dear." This was a release, not a dismissal for Nancy.

"She'll buy one and that will be a good big discount for Manny," Nancy told the girls who had heard most of the conversation.

"Yes. They've bought a new house—a brand spic-span new one," Ruth whispered. "Father said Miss Townsend wanted the shiniest one he had for sale," and there was a pardonable titter in response to that.

But guests were now arriving in pairs. There were Mr. and Mrs. Ashley, Ruth's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Duryee, Isabel's parents, besides Ted, Buster and Nero, the latter three being promptly assigned by Ruth to the corner nearest the side door.

"So you can watch for prowlers," she

joked. "Some other folks might sneak up on the porch and listen in."

"I'm all but stage struck," panted Nancy, trying to force the little kicked-up curls around her ears back into place. "And girls, take your places!" she admonished. "Here comes—the—talent! Mr. Sanders and Sibyl!"

It really was taking on the look of some sort of entertainment,—for as Mr. Sanders and his daughter arrived there was a general presentation all around by Mrs. Brandon, while the girls, feeling very much like ushers at a school entertainment, stood with backs to the windows, just as they always did at school affairs.

The preliminary formalities over, Mr. Sanders was rather humorously conducted to the "platform." This pleased Mr. Townsend "most to death" and he was heard to chuckle that "the old fire-house as town-hall had never held a better meeting."

"I'll not keep you in suspense, my friends," began Mr. Sanders, without so much as clearing his throat, "but I'll just introduce myself to those who don't happen to know me. I'm Edwin Sanders of Eastern College, professor of science there." There was a murmur through the room at that announcement.

"Professor!" was the surprised word it conveyed.

"And I came here to experiment," the gentleman continued in a pleasantly matter of fact voice. "I found this little house had a direct air shaft, it runs from this room at that old fireplace down to the cellar, and out through an old-fashioned flue-door, you know the kind."

"That's a relic on this place," spoke up Mr. Elmer Townsend. "It was built in here by a Dutch man from Holland—"

"Yes, and it's a good one," agreed Mr. Sanders. "Well, you see, my friends," he continued, "I had to experiment on an extremely delicate little instrument," he was all professor now, "so, when I found the exact conditions that I required here, I made an offer to the owner, Mr. Townsend."

There was much shifting around and significant scraping of chairs at this point, but the speaker was in no way disturbed.

"I thought it only fair to tell him how important my experiment was, and what it would mean if it worked out as I expected. Well, it did," he stated emphatically, "but not without the usual trouble that must be endured if we want to succeed in big things."

Miss Townsend was whispering, or she thought she was, and her brother was trying to restrain her.

"I could not tell the nature of this work because there was a new secret principle involved in it," Mr. Sanders said, having overheard, likely, what Miss Townsend was trying to tell her neighbor. "That was why Mr. Townsend and I had to keep our secret so close."

Ted and Buster were visibly squirming in their chairs, they were so interested, but old Nero snoozed contentedly, not even suspecting, apparently, the presence of another dog, Tiny, that was safely hidden in Miss Townsend's cushion. And as if Mr. Sanders remembered Tiny, he next said:

"Even the little dog was so interested as we worked he would insist upon barking a tune for us. Sometimes we were afraid he might tell," he finished, quizzically.

"That was it," Ted privately told Buster. "Nancy said that puny, little dog barked all the time he was in here."

"After I got my point worked out in this air shaft," went on Mr. Sanders, who had actually taken a sip of water from the glass at his hand, "I was obliged to try it out in a very much more condensed atmosphere. And just there is where I was forced to excite such wild suspicions." He was almost laughing at the recollection.

"It was funny; I'm willing to admit that myself, for like the King of France in the story, I marched up the hill, but unlike him, I did not march down again. And I'm surprised that no one seems to have guessed where I was hidden."

There was a pause. Nancy's face was betraying her suspicions but she uttered no word.

"Just once I was almost discovered," continued Mr. Sanders. "And that was the other day when my cat—cried. Just then some one was passing—"

"I was," blurted out Nancy. "And I heard you singing!"

Every one laughed.

"Was I singing, really?" asked the professor. "Well, I might have been for I was surely very happy. The anemometer was working beautifully down there, in my—cistern!"

"Cistern!" Every one seemed to cry out the word.

"He was in the cistern!" Nancy gasped. "That was where I heard the—noises coming from!"

"In the cistern!"

It took some time for the older folks to realize the significance of the revelation, but the girls and boys seemed instantly to understand.

"Yes, and you would be surprised what fine quarters I've had there. I have that nice, perfectly dry cistern actually furnished, even a rug on the floor! Chairs and a table, a looking glass—oh, you are all invited to inspect now," announced the professor cheerily, "for my precious instrument has been safely shipped to the manufacturers, and I've been able—"

"He's paid me more than a thousand dollars," declared Mr. Townsend, rising from his chair and addressing the house, "and I think it's only fair that folks around here should know how well I've made out on my investment."

"Yes indeed," Miss Townsend chimed in, "if any body in Long Leigh has heard me say I was worried about Brother Elmer's money affairs," she sort of hesitated before framing that term, "I just want them to know now that we've made more money by Mr. Sanders investment in six months, than we would make in six years in this little store."

A burst of applause followed this. And presently every one seemed to be talking at once. The formality of the occasion was lost in a round of enthusiastic interest; the men demanding to know more about the invention, while the women and girls were keen to hear all about the cistern.

Sibyl was glad to tell them about the curious little work shop under the ground, and she soon had a group of the young folks listening to her story.

"I thought it was awful, at first," she explained, "but, of course, I'm used to father's peculiar experiments. He has invented some wonderful instruments," she said this in a properly restrained voice. "They are being used in the college observatories, where they make weather predictions, you know," she pointed out.

“And I did notice some little pipes sticking out of the sides of that cistern box,” Nancy now remembered. “I might have known, but I was too surprised to investigate,” she admitted frankly.

“Really girls,” Sibyl went on, “Dad has that cistern furnished like a room. You walk down a little ladder, and sit on a regular chair—”

“But isn’t it dark?” Ruth wanted to know.

“Oh, no. One whole side of the cover is glass, a side that is back away from the opening,” Sibyl told them. “No one would ever notice the glass there. And besides that, father had cut the concrete away, over on one side of the bowl, and there he made a little skylight. You would never notice that either, as there are bushes all around it,” she said.

By this time Ted and Buster were demanding to be heard. They had tried to get a hearing with the older folks, but according to Ted "the buzzing there was worse than a bee fight."

"And say, Nan," he called out now, "I just want to know about—about what Nero was after down the cellar, you know."

Mr. Sanders was trying to make his way toward the girls just then, so Nancy delayed answering Ted.

"And say, Ted," Mr. Sanders began. "About your dog. You needn't worry that anyone will take him from you. That man who spoke to you used to be care-taker at the old stone house. And he was supposed to look after Nero, whose real name is Jason. That's the fellow who went after the Golden Fleece you remember."

"Jason?" repeated Ted. "Sounds like an auto fixer. I like Nero best."

"All right, son," and Mr. Sanders gave Ted a friendly slap on the shoulders. "Nero he shall be. But as I was saying, the man who was expected to care for your dog hadn't done so, and he's got sort of worried lately and wanted to get him back."

"He can't have him," Ted defended stoutly.

"No, that's right; he can't. And I told him so. He knows now that the dog is in good hands, and that I'll answer any questions the Ellors family care to ask about him."

Ted's face was now beaming with joy. He had been so worried about Nero that he simply wouldn't let the animal out of his protective sight for days past.

"And Mr. Sanders," he insisted, "night before last Nero saved us from a flood. A water pipe broke right over there and Nero—made us all get up—"

"Night before last!" exclaimed the professor.

"Yes; and Nancy turned off the water—"

"That was the night I had my precious little air-meter right under this chimney," said Mr. Sanders very slowly, "and if water had trickled through the floor, down onto that, it would have been ruined.''

''Then, just as Ted says,'' Nancy spoke, ''Nero really did save it, for there was a regular flood around this hearth.''

''You must have seen me leaving the grounds that afternoon,'' Mr. Sanders admitted. ''I was sure you did, but I wasn't ready to tell my story—just then. But Ted, I'll have to get you a fine collar for Nero—''

The girls were begging Nancy to make an announcement.

''Go on,'' urged Ruth. ''They're all talking together and no one will listen unless you get up on the step.''

With this and considerable more urging, Nancy finally mounted the step. She smiled shyly at her mother as she passed along, for Mrs. Brandon, like the other ''principals,'' was having a busy time of it.

''I just want to say,'' Nancy began with a little quaver in her voice, ''that we've prepared some little cakes and punch as samples of our cooking class work, and we'll be glad to have you all stay and try them."

There was real applause at this, and mentioning the cooking class—was a signal for another outburst of comment from the ladies. They all believed in girls doing something during summer, and they did not believe in girls "wasting" an entire vacation.

"I think we ought to give a cheer for the girls," Mr. Sanders proposed. "They have kept things going pretty lively around here this summer, just lively enough to save me from having been discovered."

"And I'd like to say a word," ventured timid Miss Manners. But the girls would not permit her to do so, Nancy, especially being fearful that the little lady's gratitude, for the domestic science class and for Mrs. Brandon's hospitality might become embarrassing.

"Any how," said Buster to Ted, "we can have our dog."

"And a dandy new collar," appended Ted.

Nancy was waiting a chance to finish her announcements, and in a little lull she again called out:

"Mr. Sanders and Miss Sanders are entertaining tomorrow evening at the Waterfall House. Every body is invited! And you will be treated there to some real samples of our cakes!"

"Now I call that lov-el-lee," declared Miss Townsend, shaking her new hat at every syllable. "And these cakes," (the girls were passing them) "are de-lic-ious."

Nancy was very happy. She tugged at her mother's arm and cuddled her head against the loving shoulder, just as she had always done in her great moments.

"Isn't it lov-ell-lee, Mums," she whispered.

"A complete—success!" murmured the mother.

And the next morning half, if not all, of Long Leigh trooped up the hill to inspect the wonderfully outfitted and "infitted" cistern, that had so long escaped notice, on the grounds of the old, stone house.

"I was going to look down that cistern first chance I got," Nancy confessed. "But being successful is such a busy—business," she joked, "that I think it will be a delightful change to begin a real vacation with mother tomorrow."

THE END

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